



DROWNING DEFINITIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) adopted new drowning definitions in 2002. These drowning definitions have now become the standard language when referring to drowning internationally¹. Please replace all other currently used language for drowning with these four definitions:

- **Drowning** is the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid.
- **Drowning without morbidity** occurs when the victim has survived the submersion/immersion episode with good cerebral performance.
- **Drowning with morbidity** occurs when the victim has survived the submersion/immersion episode with poor cerebral performance (to include moderately disabled, severely disabled, comatose and brain death).
- **Death by drowning** occurs when the victim has succumbed to a submersion/immersion episode.

BACKGROUND

Experts in clinical medicine from all over the world determined that the current definitions of drowning are confusing and not suitable to categorize current drowning statistics. The consensus was that the new definition should include both cases of fatal and nonfatal drowning as per the Utstein Report².

After considerable dialogue and debate, the aforementioned definitions and drowning outcomes were adopted. There was also consensus that the terms wet, dry, active, passive, silent, secondary and near-drowning should no longer be used.

DROWNING VICTIM FOLLOW-UP

Care for victims of a submersion/immersion incident involves three primary components: assessment, education and redirection.

- **Assess** the victim for signs & symptoms of drowning.
- **Educate** the victim about the signs & symptoms of drowning and that they may present immediately or be delayed up to 72 hours.
- **Redirect** victim to EMS, shallow water and/or a PFD where appropriate

Drowning Definitions & Victim Follow-Up

The signs & symptoms of drowning include:

- Altered level of consciousness or change in behaviour
- Extreme tiredness and/or weakness
- Difficulty breathing/shortness of breath
- Coughing or wheezing
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Frothy sputum

If a victim is exhibiting any of these signs or symptoms, contact EMS. If there are no signs or symptoms present, advise all adult victims to seek medical attention if signs or symptoms present within 72 hours. For victims less than 19 years old, notify and/or advise the victim's guardian as the condition may become life-threatening.

REFERENCES

²Utstein Report (*ILCOR Advisory Statement/Resuscitation 59 [2003]45-57*)

van Beeck, E. F., Branche, C.M., Szpilman, D., Modell, J. H., & Bierens, J.J.L.M. (2005, November). *A new definition of drowning: towards documentation and prevention of a global public health problem*. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/83/11/853.pdf>

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