

Junior and Volunteer Lifeguard: A new concept to help the professional on duty

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Summary

Until 1995, prevention of drowning was restricted to professional lifeguards. With the Brazilian Lifesaving Society (SOBRASA) foundation, by water safety expert firefighters, started the wish of the society to help. In 1996, many young people volunteered themselves to help to prevent drowning. At the beginning it was very difficult to organize a prevention program on drowning without putting them at risk of accident. This paper describes how we managed to do it, decreasing the risk to those who volunteer themselves to help others in danger.

Project: The project “Junior and Volunteer Lifeguard” is 1 year long, February to January, limited to Rio de Janeiro’s beaches. A junior lifeguard is 15 to 20 years old and volunteers are above 21 years. The project does not offer any assistance for payment or meals, but offers a uniform (trunks, t-shirt and hat), a pair of fins and personal and professional assistance. The program was divided in 6 different stages: 1st stage: induction into project; 2nd stage, health certificate for exertion, parents authorization for those below 21 years old (contract signed), complete an initial physical evaluation and have a personal health insurance for accidents; 3rd stage, 80 hours course preparatory along 5 weekends from 8AM to 5PM and tests (table 1); 4th stage, if they pass through stage 3, starts an 11 month rookie program, on weekends and holidays, from 9AM to 3 PM, which is a practice training together with professional lifeguard. The training is obligatory to be with another buddy and a professional lifeguard and they are not allowed to do any rescue alone or without the strict orientation of the professional. Each junior and volunteer lifeguard has their own personal log book/form to be completed by their instructor every day. 5th stage, for certification there needs to be completed at least 36 days on duty, graduation above 7.0 in tests and in the instructor evaluation, 70% of participation on SOBRASA prevention events, and if they are students, their final year approval at the school or university. 6th stage, after completion of 12 months, they are classified by achievement in order to have the opportunity to continue for 1 to 2 years more. The first year would be as a lifeguard assistant (need to have completed high school), and the second year as a lifeguard instructor (need to be in University).

Results: Junior and volunteer lifeguard program was conducted for 6 years, from 1996 to 2001. The program enrolled a total of 320 young people among 650 volunteers. The numbers of people interested increased each year, from 35 at the beginning to the last group of 80 persons. Women were 35% of the candidates and this was the first time females were in lifesaving in our country. Rescue reports evaluated during this period and made by volunteers was 18.000. Prevention action at the beach was not reported, but was estimated as a minimum of 3 to 5 times the number of rescues. They also had simple tasks as, find and take care of lost children, give information to beach users, sign post the warning spots, to assist on first aid, and help the professional with rescue and medical reports. Due to the innovative project characteristics, television, radio and news paper media were frequently present, especially for covering women working as a lifeguard. The value of this spontaneous media was estimated at US\$ 224,589.11. Seventeen professional lifeguards from Fire Department of Rio de Janeiro came from this volunteer program.

Discussion/Conclusion: The youth project on drowning prevention is very rewarding, although the extent to which is always at question. The junior and volunteer lifeguard program has a unique way of operating among the many youth projects in that area. The motivation to get enrolled is clearly the identification with the hero part of the lifeguard job. At the beginning they have no idea of what responsibilities will come with the volunteer work, but as the program develops, the majority of them fit in very well and establish an excellent commitment with the cause of saving lives. They have the

focus and the will to help, not just to preserve the safety on the beach but also during other prevention projects concerning Brazilian Lifesaving Society, which brings a large influence on different levels within the community and mainly beyond their family. The immense participation of spontaneous media, allows many drowning prevention tips to be spread around the State and the country at almost no cost. They save directly and indirectly hundreds of thousands of lives which are priceless. Another innovative concept was to start the idea of women lifeguards beside the men. Some professionals were pleased to work with volunteers, but others were very uncomfortable and afraid to loose their jobs to what they called, a volunteer organization. That was unfortunately the reason the program stopped in 2001. This volunteer group still gets together some times, always look to have fun at water sports and leisure and they will be always lifeguards whenever they are near water, being part of a great chain on drowning prevention and survival.

Learning Outcomes

1. Why use youth to increase knowledge through public education and awareness?
2. How to manage the volunteers among professionals?
3. How these yearly programs contribute to reduce drowning?

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