

A COMPARISON BETWEEN LIFEGUARD CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS ACROSS THE WORLD: ARE LIFEGUARDS ADEQUATELY TRAINED?

Drowning is a public health problem of global significance and enormous impact, yet it is preventable one. According to the Drowning Prevention Chain and strategies to reduce drowning proposed by the International Lifesaving Federation, one of the factors for drowning is the lack of supervision or surveillance, and the main measure proposed to address this factor is the extension of lifesaving services.

Lifeguard services are highly dependent on the ability and effectiveness of the people who comprise them – first responders, rescue watercraft operators, paramedics, service coordinators, and mainly lifeguards. However, the training of lifeguards is very diverse in terms of duration, level of demand and skills worked, depending on the countries or regions. It also varies depending on whether people are preparing to work in swimming pools or in natural aquatic spaces.

There is also very different local, state and national legislation regarding the minimum training requirements that a person must meet as a lifeguard and who are the competent bodies to certify first responders.

We conducted a comparative study of 26 lifeguard certification programs from the most respected institutions in 19 countries on 4 continents. This study reviewed the didactic objectives, duration, contents, methodology and marks of evaluation of the programs.

Most of these programs are based on the development of skills and knowledge that can be grouped into four areas: physical fitness and swimming, prevention, rescue and first aid and resuscitation techniques, which are consistent with the role and responsibilities assigned to lifeguards in the certification guidelines of the International Lifesaving Federation and main providers of lifeguard services worldwide.

Nonetheless, significant differences were found with respect to duration, methodology and evaluation systems of the programs. This study seeks to highlight those differences, in order to generate a debate which may ultimately help to align lifeguard certification programs.

In addition, the analysis of the distribution of teaching hours and contents among the different areas show a clear predominance of training in rescue techniques and first aid and resuscitation techniques, despite all guidelines emphasizing that the primary responsibility of lifeguard services is prevention (2). Also evaluation systems are strongly focused in physical fitness and first-aid competence, with little if any attention paid to candidates proving their practical competence in prevention activities (3).

We propose more research of content and redistribute the workload of the courses.

Further research is proposed on the suitability of redistribution of contents and teaching hours of lifeguard certifications programs towards prevention skills, as well as on the development of competency-based learning of prevention skills.