International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education

Volume 6 | Number 4 Article 3

11-1-2012

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International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education, 2012, 6, 293-293

International Journal of
Aquatic Research and Education
www.IJARE-Journal.com
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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In the article, "Identification of Critical Events by Lifeguards, Instructors, and Non-Lifeguards," Lyndsey K. Lanagan-Leitzel reports on how trained lifeguards and lifeguard instructors identified (or failed to identify) "critical" events depicted in films. The author repeatedly refers to training manuals offered by several national organizations, including that of the United States Lifesaving Association, but does not identify the certification system under which the subjects of the study were trained. The author seems to suggest that conclusions regarding all lifeguards in all environments can be drawn from a study involving a few lifeguards in what appear to be non-surf open water and pool areas in Connecticut.

The author concludes, in part, "This study reveals that experienced lifeguard instructors, lifeguards, and nonlifeguards do not identify the same events as critical for a lifeguard to monitor." Interesting conclusion, but is it valid and is it universally applicable?

Since no lifeguard agencies in Connecticut are certified to USLA standards, it seems safe to assume (in absence of disclosure by the author) that the subjects of this study were not trained to USLA standards. It also appears that although over 80% of rescues by lifeguards at surf beaches are caused by rip currents, that particular hazard was not depicted in the study, since the ocean beaches involved were apparently on Long Island Sound, where rips would be very limited.

Statistics reported to the USLA each year by open water lifeguard agencies consistently indicate that the frequency of drowning death in areas protected by lifeguards affiliated with the USLA is one in 18 million beach visits. Over the past five years, an average of over 70,000 rescues per year was reported by 111 lifeguard agencies. It would certainly seem that with this level of rescues (which might logically be indicative of critical events), lifeguards in this case are doing a fairly consistent and effective job of identifying hazards and responding to them. If they weren't, one would expect to see a far higher number of "missed" rescues and resulting drowning deaths.

The term "lifeguard" is universally applied by laypersons, but in research we need to understand that all lifeguards are not the same.

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