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Is There a Crisis in The Aquatics Profession?

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Background

I believe there is a crisis in the aquatics professions. How does it manifest itself? Let me tell you! Facts are difficult to obtain but observation allows logical estimation. Rather than speculating, let's ask some questions, the possible answers to which should cause us all concern. Globally, 131.4 million children are born every year, rising exponentially in some countries. This is 360,000 every day, 15,000 every hour (WHO, 2017). This is a huge cohort of new non-swimmers every day. *The question is can we keep up?* Observation suggests that we are not training new instructors at an adequate rate. We are overwhelmed.

The Demand

The word “demand” here allows the idea that supply and demand (an economic concept) can be used metaphorically to help us quantify the situation of the aquatics profession. We are talking about the “need” for drowning prevention. *What is really the scope of the global drowning problem? What is the “demand” for new instructors?* Far greater than most realize I fear. *Are we keeping up?*

Global Scope of Drowning

The need is suggested by the drowning rate. Experts agree that the real rate of drowning may be 2-3 times greater than the official 360,000 (WHO, 2017). If so, more people drown than die of HIV-related diseases (< 1,000,000; UNAIDS, 2017), perhaps more than traffic deaths (1.25 million – WHO, 2015). Far more people drown than most people (and governments) realize. It is a leading killer, a major public health problem worthy of more attention than it gets. Many of these deaths are preventable. Additionally, we now understand that the number of non-fatal episodes with death occurring later or with major complications is underestimated and has a great impact on society. One of the more important interventions is teaching people to be water competent. *What do we teach and how – and by whom?*

The Supply

One of the largest organizations in the world, which teaches people to swim and trains instructors, teaches between 2-3 million to swim each year. They train about 15,000 instructors each year. They have a stable number of instructors of about 40,000. There are also many private persons who teach primarily for profit. They tend to teach to/for the paying client, according to the clients' wishes rather than addressing the needs of drowning prevention. While this may increase the number

of instructors, *does it increase the availability of quality teaching? Do more children learn that which is needed?* Poor quality teaching may actually contribute to drowning rather than to prevention.

The Turnover

While there are few statistics available, observation suggests that in many high-income countries (HICs) the average career of a swimming instructor is no more than 2 - 4 years. If we stick to the organization named above, which trains 15,000 instructors each year and maintains 40,000 instructors actively teaching, this suggests that our instructors continue for an average of 2.67 years. *Is this enough experience to get good at it?*

The Consequences

Anders Eriksson, expert on expertise, tells us it takes about 10,000 hours over at least 10 years to become an expert. This means that a true expert has trained at their specialty 1000 hours or more per year, or 2.5 - 3 hours every day, seven days a week – for at least 10 years! Our average instructor probably teaches no more than half as many hours per week, not all year – and only for 2.67 years. Our typical instructor will experience fewer than 1000 hours in their entire career. If we accept half of this number of hours just to get good enough to help to reduce the risk of drowning, our representative instructor will only reach one-fifth of the time required just to get good at it. “Does this mean that *most* instructors are *not* good at teaching? and that *most* of our children are taught by persons *not good at teaching swimming?*” If so, it’s little wonder so many cannot swim.

Additional negative consequences are that inexperienced instructors a) treat all learners as if they are alike – a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach; b) use only a teacher-centered, command style of instruction; c) adopt an error correction approach focused on eliminating mistakes instead of building on that which is effective; d) fail to build a solid foundation by instead focusing on propulsion; and e) fail to objectively and reliably assess when and how learners are ready for a next step – and which step is next (for each individual)!



Assoc. Prof Emeritus Bob Stallman PhD (Norway & Tanzania) has a lifetime involvement in many aquatic activities. He has coached and taught in six different countries. He is especially interested in learning to swim as a drowning prevention intervention, lifesaving education of the general public, lifeguard training, movement analysis of lifesaving techniques, and public water safety awareness.