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Child drowning in Bangladesh

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The weather is already warming up as Bangladeshis start preparing for a long, sweltering summer. Before we know it, the rains will begin and the rivers, dams, drains and ditches across the country will start filling up with water and eventually the country will experience the annual floods.

This is the perfect time to take a minute to stop and think about the very real dangers of children around water.

Rowshon Ara is a mother of three children in North Kochikata, Manohardi. One day, that started like all the rest, she went to prepare some food for her 18 month old son Rajon. She left her son for no longer than 10 minutes, and on her return he had disappeared.

Tragically, locals found his body in a pond just 50 metres from their house. This happened five years ago and even now, every single day, Rowshon lives with the pain of losing her young son in such a preventable accident.

This is an all too common story in Bangladesh.

Drowning is the leading cause of death in children aged 1-17 years in Bangladesh. On average, 50 children drown a day in this country, claiming 18,000 young lives every year. This startling statistic is enough to shock any health worker, parent or politician, but it's very real and it's happening every day. This is a public health issue and needs to be addressed immediately.

Given that the majority of the Bangladeshi population lives in rural areas, it's no surprise that most of drowning deaths take place there. There is an abundance of ponds and rivers that will soon swell, and can prove deadly if a child wanders near one, falls in and finds himself in trouble. Research from the most recent Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey shows that the main reason young children drown is a lack of supervision.

But it's not just rural children who are victims of drowning. It's common for families who live in Dhaka or Chittagong to head to the beautiful beaches of Cox's Bazar or St. Martin's Island. It's also unfortunately all too common for children to rush into the water in excitement without knowing how to swim or how to survive if they get in trouble.

Few will know that significant world leading research is currently taking place in Bangladesh to understand the epidemiology of the epidemic, and to develop effective interventions. The national SwimSafe programme has taught over 100,000 Bangladeshi children how to swim in an effort to understand the relationship between swimming ability and drowning. Furthermore, research is currently being undertaken on the effectiveness of developing a volunteer-based first responder network for First Aid and CPR. Interestingly, this will be the first time the effectiveness of CPR has been tested in a developing country.

The International Drowning Research Centre Bangladesh (IDRC-B), the only research centre of its kind in the world, is based in Dhaka because of the extent of the problem and was established with international partners Royal Life Saving Society Australia, The Alliance for Safe Children and AusAID.

The IDRC-B had a strong presence at the World Conference on Drowning Prevention that was recently held in Vietnam. The gathering was the first time the world's leading researchers, policy makers, lifesavers and NGO workers in the drowning prevention sector came together to discuss the global issue, and Bangladesh had the unique opportunity to share the ground-breaking steps being undertaken to reduce child drowning not just in our own country, but across Asia and other developing countries.

New evidence presented at the conference by IDRC-B and its partners showed that the 300,000 deaths by drowning across Asia each year could be dramatically reduced by as much as 85% with the effective implementation of the unique interventions developed in Bangladesh.

We can all do something to prevent this national epidemic. It starts with the basics -- ensure that children are under constant supervision near water. Enrol your child in swimming lessons to provide them with the skills to survive in water. Learn basic first aid so you know what to do if someone needs medical assistance.

Child drowning is something we can all prevent -- so let's stop these tragic, unnecessary deaths.

The writers are Director and Research Fellow, respectively, International Drowning Research Centre Bangladesh.

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