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Farmsafe Toolbox Talks – Transcript of Podcast #11

'Water Safety in Rural and Regional Australia - Royal Life Saving Australia' with CEO Justin Scarr

Host: Dr Richard Franklin, James Cook University

Guest: Justin Scarr, CEO, Royal Lifesaving Australia

Voiceover:

"Welcome to Farmsafe Toolbox Talks. A podcast series focusing on farm culture, leading to a healthier and safer working, living and playing environment. Here's your host Richard Franklin."

Dr Richard Franklin:

"Today's podcast is brought to you by Farmsafe Australia under funding from the Australian Government, Department for Agriculture, Water and the Environment. I'm your host, Richard Franklin, and today we're talking to Justin Scarr from the Royal Life Saving Society Australia. For over 127 years, Royal Life Saving has worked in communities across Australia to reduce drowning and turn everyday people into everyday life savers. Many of you will remember swimming in your pajamas or your dad's clothes or diving to the bottom of the pool to pick up a brick. These are part of Royal Life Saving Swim and Survive program. However, they do much more than this. They deliver first aid training, teach people how to run pools, be a lifeguard or swim teacher. They have awareness campaigns such as 'Make the Right Call', which talks about alcohol and river safety and the iconic 'Keep Watch' program around keeping children safe around water. They do much more than this. And today, joining me is Justin Scarr, the Chief Executive Officer of the Royal Life Saving Society and he's just celebrated 10 years in the position as Chief Executive Officer. He's the convener of the Australian Water Safety Council, the Drowning Prevention Commissioner for the International Life Saving Federation. He's also undertaking a PhD, Justin I'm not too sure how you have time for all this, but welcome. And can you tell us a little bit more about yourself?"

Justin Scarr:

"Yeah, Richard, great, great to be with you. I probably feel like I need to establish some credibility with your audience though. So, I'm the grandson of a shearer, a Central West shearer from... from Tullamore in that area, and my great grandfather was a stock and station agent in the Central West as well. So spent a little bit of time in regional Australia as a kid and but you know, very firmly a city slicker now."

Dr Richard Franklin:

"Yeah, thanks for being here. And I guess, you know, Royal Life Saving, a really great organisation working across Australia, as I said before."

"So, what are some of the kind of current challenges that you see about, particularly people living on farms, but we'll go a bit more broadly and just talk about rural populations to start off with and then hone into the farming population."

Committed to keeping you safer on Australian Farms

Justin Scarr:

“Yeah, look Richard, it's a, it's a really good starting point, right? One of the challenges with water safety in Australia is we tend to be very generic, right? We apply the same water safety messages generically across the country. And we miss out on really sort of drilling in and focusing on the subpopulations, the groups, and focusing on their risks and exposure and vulnerabilities to water, but also their recreational enjoyment and love of water. So, it is very different when we talk about regional Australia compared to those living in cities. And then secondly, we shouldn't sort of generically just talk about regional Australia, we should separate out farm-related drowning and drowning prevention.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“Yeah, absolutely agree. And I know that we've been talking about this previously, obviously, but rivers are kind of an underrepresented or under-acknowledged area for drowning prevention. People often think of beaches as the go to place where people drown, and all the rest of it. But can you talk a little bit more about what you're doing around rivers? What I mean, how are people drowning in rivers, and what we could do to be a little bit safer?”

Justin Scarr:

“Yeah, so, in generic terms, around about 1/3 of drowning in Australia, each and every year happens in what we would call inland waterways. So that includes rivers and lakes, creeks, and somewhere like that. It doesn't include swimming pools, swimming pools account again, although it's reducing as proportion, for around about 20 to 25%. And then, you know, coastal environments also account for 30%. So, so inland waterways, rivers specifically, are vitally important to Australia's way of life. It also represents some pretty significant drowning risk, though, and the interactions with rivers are quite significantly varied from those other interactions in traditional water locations. So river rated drowning deaths tends to be high on alcohol, and alcohol in recreational activities. We also see a significant proportion of people drowning, driving through flooded roadways, particularly during times of flood. And we also see country kids also playing and swimming and recreating in and around those river locations and getting themselves into trouble.”

“So, we have a range of campaigns. One of the one of the key insights and you were involved in this many years ago is used to actually sort of analyze the data and have a look at at where and how and why. And then the insight really is to localise, localise our drowning prevention programs, whether that's localising a message like ‘Respect the River’, recognising the difference between the drowning risk around the Murray and drowning risk around the Daly River in the Northern Territory. Still river systems, the drowning risk does vary depending on the population. So, we're really tailoring those localised messages.”

“We're working in a local water safety planning model at the moment. We've identified a range of drowning black spots or places where there are high rates of drowning in rivers and then trying to localise actions with those local communities and recognising that the players, they're the people that can make a difference to prevention. It might be everything from the local government to the water catchment authorities, it might be those tourism operators that run caravan parks, it might be the local, you know, farming association that has some skin in the game in terms of influencing local communities.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“Yeah, lots going on around rivers and as you say, they are very much the lifeblood. And you know, I remember growing up and going to river and getting on the jetski and fishing and boating and, you know, swimming in them and going yabbing and etc.”

“And I think the other thing that you picked up on that I do want to delve into a little bit more detail is the flooding issue. We've seen a lot of flooding throughout Australia, obviously, some major stuff in northern New South Wales. The message about you know, 'Forget It, It's Flooded' type of thing is, is obviously very nice for those that are driving through.”

“What else are we learning about kind of flooding, I guess, for our farming community out there? How can they be better prepared and what do they need to know a little bit more about keeping themselves safe around flooding?”

Justin Scarr:

“Look, a lot of the focus of flooding tends to be in that cataclysmic event the flash flooding and the impacts of significant drowning events in very short interval periods. So, 24 hours in Lismore absolutely catastrophic impacts on the people of Lismore, for example. And in Somerset, New Zealand has also experienced this short, high intensity flash flooding, that creates drowning risk, but I guess in in country, Australia, you know, generations we've been dealing with inundation and that sort of slow burn inundation.”

“If you have a look at what's happened along the Murray course, communities have had two and three weeks to plan for that inevitable inundation. As the water drains through the watercourse and moves through that area, which gives people a little bit more time to plan, they still have significant issues around roadways, and the state of roadways in regional Australia is a... is a key issue, right? And so, you know, focusing on... on roads, and floodways, and causeway is still a vital part of flood safety in regional Australia, but then also looking at inundation and what the consequence of inundation is and whether we look at the increased drowning risks to children in and around properties.”

“And we know that about 30% of, of dam related drownings are also occupational so people working in and around farms. And I think that the drowning is the highest proportion of child related drowning deaths on properties as well. And so, we'd well, we don't necessarily have any data, it sort of holds, if there's more water in and around the farm, there's more of water in and around communities, then children are more likely to be exposed to those water related hazards.”

“So, flood related drowning deaths and drowning prevention is really, really quite complex. But it also reinforces that the... the...the groups that can help with this are a long, long way away from the lifesaving organisations that you traditionally hear through Summit, right? So it is really the farming associations, it is really local government, it's the water catchment authorities, it's the Bureau of Meteorology, it's all of those groups that should really combine to help us make sure that we can eliminate as many drowning deaths as possible in times of flooding.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“Yeah, some really good advice. And it's kind of interesting... I was in South Australia when the issues were going on about the dams collapsing because they've had so much rain and you know, they so waterlogged, that they were going to collapse as part of it. But we're, as part of that dam health sort of side of it, making sure they're okay.”

‘But you were talking a little bit about children before as well. And I want to delve a little bit more into that. How do we keep children safe on farms, particularly around dams? I mean, it's kind of goes to the safe play area and building that. But

what's... what's Royal Life Saving doing in this space? And you know, what's the message that you'd like to get out around that in particular?"

Justin Scarr:

"Yeah, certainly our message, our messages in this area are aligned to those of Farmsafe and... and we certainly take advice from experts in this field. Absolutely we've reinforced the importance of safe play areas, particularly for young children. We're actually very active in terms of advocating the rights to every child in Australia to learn to swim, but also specifically the rights of regional kids to build their swimming and water safety abilities. We've got a campaign which is sort of 'Keep Watch on Farms', which we push out through community groups to try and raise awareness within regional communities of the importance of supervising young children around those watercourses."

"So, look, there's a range of strategies that obviously varies from from.. from place to place farm, the look and feel of a farm, you know, is very, very... it varies a lot across the country. And so, the tailoring of those messages is really important."

Dr Richard Franklin:

"Yeah, I mean, we always talk about not being able to fence kind of the dam because animals need to get to it and the safe play area is a really nice sort of strategy - for those that don't know about safe play areas you can either find it on the Royal Life Saving or the Farmsafe website. Have a look at what that looks like for very young kids."

"I want to talk a little bit more about swim lessons. You know, you and I've talked about this in the past, obviously crucial part of a child's development. But do we need to be thinking a little bit more about getting them into other locations? I mean, often swim lessons are at the local pool. What are your thoughts around getting them to swim in rivers or dams or other spaces to help improve their swimming ability?"

Justin Scarr:

"Yeah, my... my view on this is that it starts with swimming though, right? And it can't be a proxy for real swimming lessons. There's no, there's no substitute for, for learning to swim. And generally, the Learn to Swim process is better done in a community swimming pool. And so there is certainly a big push to contextualise those skills by exposing children, particularly to rivers and swimming in rivers or swimming in lakes and swimming at the beach. And all of that is fantastic. As long as it doesn't come at the cost of those initial lessons that actually build capability skills in swimming."

"So, from my perspective, I think there's a real moral hazard in taking a child that can't swim, and having them play in the shallows at the local river as part of an education program, and possibly contributing to them missing out on those valuable actual Learn to Swim lessons in that local pool. So, we've got to be really careful we do both."

"And we've got to invest in in Learn to Swim and particularly for regional Australia's, but the most, the really important issue is that if you don't have a Learn to Swim center on your local corner, the drive to swimming lessons can be considerable right so that the likelihood that you're going to go back and forth weekly, take your child into town to do a swimming lessons, it's... it's a huge barrier for country people, right? And that's what so that's where the vacation programs are really vitally important. We know through South Australia, Western Australia, regional communities really love their Vac-Swim programs. In Victoria, they love the Vac-Swim program, because they know that for a week in January or two weeks in January, they can organise to take their kids to town, package it up with some other activities and give

them some intensive Learn to Swim that they can't actually do on a weekly basis, fitting in with a you know, a busy farming lifestyle.”

“So, we would say our position is very clear. We've got to reinvest and strengthen vacation programs, particularly for regional kids, we need to invest in those school-based programs. So, where the school is out of town, doesn't have access to a pool, thinking through how the school delivers Learn to Swim. If there is a - there is a pool in town, then that... that program needs to be well funded and accessible because it's absolutely vital to compensate for the lack of access to regular Learn to Swim in regional communities.”

“And then we should talk about exposing those kids like they will be anyway in the same way city kids are likely to go to the beach on a weekend, country kids are likely to go to the massive sort of recreational dam. And you know, Dad's fishing or they've got this ski boat out and those sorts of things. So, they still get exposed to water. But we do need to contextualise that learning.”

“But it really does start with Learn to Swim and shouldn't be a replacement for actually teaching kids how to swim.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“Yeah, I think that's a really great message. And obviously fundamental to going on, as you say, and having other aquatic experiences as you move through. I think just if we could just pick away a little bit at some of these challenges that we've been talking about. We've heard a lot about swim teachers. That's it, is there a way that we can get others involved in local areas to become a swim teacher and, and help out with a vacation program or something like that?”

Justin Scarr:

“Yeah, we believe so, if you're, if you're living in Tullamore, Central West, New South Wales, and you know, they've got a great sort of 35 metre pool that was probably crowdfunded by local farmers way back in the 50s, or 60s, when the population there was 1000, not 300. And so, the struggle is actually resourcing that particular pool, and it's a combination of getting lifeguards there, but also swimming instructors. And there's simply not enough work to keep them busy. Not enough kids. And so, we kind of got to figure out how we resource more activities in and around those regional pool locations. And give the people that are looking for work -and a lot of you know, regional people are looking for work - actually package it up so that there's a sustainable career there, rather than just two weeks of work in January. And so, you know, funding programs, government needs to play a much more significant role in the country compared to the city where things naturally sort of occur with a market orientation. So, so finding ways to supplement work, package up work so that you know, someone actually has the opportunity to work for year-round, or at least a couple of months rather than a couple of weeks is one of the challenges of swimming instructors are even pool lifeguards in the country.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“Yeah, I think that'd be really interesting. And I know we've been talking about how you might use some of your aquatic centers as waypoints for your grey nomads to come on and go for a bit of a swim and use the facilities and work through... it's... I'll be interested to hear what you do in that space. And it is a real challenge. I mean, I think workforce is a challenge across the board and we know just from... from farming experience just getting workers to come on farms and work is tough. So, I imagine in some of these more casual occupations, it's even tougher as we work through.”

"I think that goes to my next question, which is talking, you talk to the Farmsafe conference a little bit about, about training and getting people trained. So how do we do this for rural areas and kind of what's ...what's this training space looking like to get people to do first aid or to swim teachers or lifeguard but what's going on there?"

Justin Scarr:

"Government more recently, the federal government has made some changes to and this is economy wide, right? This... this response to labor shortages, response to sort of transitioning people from a COVID effected world into real work and meaningful work. So, there's quite a lot of funding available for traineeships, for qualifications that we're hopeful will spread across the country evenly and not just be, you know, pocketed in the cities. And there's some opportunities around that. But that's very much work based. And they're large qualifications."

"It's not what you're talking about in terms of what we would describe as community education -so every community having access to first... a first aid course, every community having access to basic lifesaving skills, is a slightly separate challenge from the workforce challenge."

"Royal Life Saving proudly as an organisation, we, you know, we're spread mostly across the country, you know, many of our state branches have also got regional offices and have done for 25 to 30 years or so. Traditionally, there was a volunteer lifesaving instructor in most communities, that's changed a little bit, as there's more and more pressure on community life and volunteering, and but still represents a significant challenge, we tend to see the activity. And in fact our theory there is that if we can get something going with a little bit of seed funding, then hopefully that will sort of break down some barriers and transition activity to sort of more ...more sort of community sustained activity."

"I mean, a number of our branches, work with local licensed clubs to try and focus on their grants to try and cross subsidise community education. It's certainly a big challenge, particularly in regional Australia. And we should also remember when we're talking about regional Australia, which... which is around 60%, of drowning, actually happens away from the big cities. 60%, right? It's a significant issue that gets overshadowed by our focus on these sort of very generic messages of water safety. And, and the core assumptions of people is that, you know, we specifically - it's tourists that drown, and people drown on beaches. And that's about it. So, we've got to be better at advocating for that 60% of drowning that occurs in in regional... in regional areas. And you know, there's plenty of opportunities in how we will continue to do that."

Dr Richard Franklin:

"Yeah, I just want to bring it back for the last little bit of the podcast into the farm and just thinking about, obviously, children are high risk. We've talked about dams, sort of other locations on the farms, there's quite a lot of different water sources – what... what's kind of the strategies that people should be thinking about to keep their kids safe, besides the kind of the safe play area, and we've talked about supervision, but what else can they do?"

Jusin Scarr:

"I think that the topic we haven't talked about on farms is actually workers, occupational related drowning deaths. This, around about 30% of the drowning deaths we see in dams are actually men and women working, it's not children. So, we've got to focus on ...on and then that could be anything from a tractor rollover, when someone's trying to repair the dam wall, it might be, you know, some sort of incident that involves an irrigation channel. So, whether it's, you know, a local farming family, or it's an industrial farming activity, those workers that work, work, health and safety, regulations are

really important in terms of farm safety training, to make sure that we, you know, protect workers as much as possible, including farm owners.”

“I don't have the data in front of me, but my suspicion is a lot of that is actually ageing farm workers as well. So, it's, it's people, it's related to falls, and it's related to other medical conditions. And so perhaps there's something there that we need to work on helping those sort of, you know, multigenerational farming families to understand that perhaps, you know, moving around the farm, particularly during times of flooding, poses significant risk, and they need to put some safety precautions in place.”

“And then we've gone and got that water irrigation industry, which is really resource water intensive. And just making sure that whether it's on a state-by-state basis, or whether it's nationally, that we're focused in on those sort of drowning deaths and those pockets of risk, and making sure that the systems are in place to try and eliminate the risk to workers in and around irrigation channels.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“And yeah, look really good point. I don't think people are necessarily thinking about water as a risk area on the farm. So, thank you for bringing that up. And I think having strategies in place and obviously as we age, it's really important to think through what we're doing around water and those challenging aspects there.”

“I think you talked a little bit about being on machinery and rolling into water-based areas, partly because of the slope around dams or irrigation channels, etc. So, again, a big call-out for people to add that into their risk matrix when they're on a farm and trying to keep their employees and themselves safe as part of that process.”

“Well, is there any last words of wisdom that you'd like to finish up on Justin, before we head off?”

Justin Scarr:

“I think I'm out of wisdom actually. But you know, what are we coming to - we're coming to Easter. Or actually, at any time of year, people are thinking about holidays, it's been a pretty rough couple of years. So if you're out there and thinking about a holiday, then also factor you know, drowning... drowning prevention into your holiday. Factor in the fun, but also, sort of look at a ...look at a mini plan to work out whether you're the weather's okay for that boating activity, or whether your equipment includes a lifejacket, whether there are enough life jackets for the kids if you're going out boating. You know, absolutely enjoy the water but enjoy the water safely.”

Dr Richard Franklin:

“Thanks for that and obviously around alcohol if you're going to drink, do it after you've been in the water.”

“Thank you very much for being here today, Justin. Being on the podcast has been really great. If people want more information about Royal Life Saving they can go to www.royallifesaving.com.au or to farmsafe.org.au for more information around keeping yourself safe on the farm.”

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