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What Floats Your Boaters? – A Commentary

Mary Martinasek, MPH, CHES

ABSTRACT

Florida has over one million registered boaters not including the plethora of canoes and other paddle craft for which registration is not required. Whereas wearing a seatbelt in a car is regulated by law and has become a routine practice for the majority of Floridians, wearing a personal flotation device (PFD) while boating is neither mandatory nor routine. Florida has ranked first annually among states in boating fatalities since 2003, and accounted for 10.9% of the total number of U.S. boating deaths in 2006. This commentary argues for making PFD use mandatory in an environment where the social norm is absence of use.

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We recently experienced the first anniversary of the death of a 16-year-old Tampa boy who was ejected from his parents' watercraft during a family outing on the Gulf of Mexico. This young man likely would be alive today if he were wearing a personal flotation device (PFD). There is no doubt that wearing a PFD decreases fatalities (Lawrence & Miller, 2006).

Each summer, boaters are preparing to explore the open waters and enjoy the waterways of Florida. Florida has over one million registered boaters (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission [FWC], 2008a) not including the plethora of canoes and other paddle craft for which registration is not required. Boating is a way of life in Florida and for some people, an expression of freedom. As boaters drive their vehicles to the closest boat ramp to launch their watercraft, they sit tightly secured in their seatbelts. Once they reach the water's edge the seatbelt security is removed and the freedom to roam the moving watercraft is limitless. However, there is a fine line between freedom of choice and risk.

Wearing a seatbelt in a car is mandatory and rather automatic for most drivers, whereas wearing a PFD while boating is neither mandatory, nor perhaps, even considered by boaters. Understandably, the older style PFDs were rather bulky, and perhaps, unsightly with their effervescent orange coloring leading to their use remaining largely tucked away in a boat's cabin as a potential pillow for a sleepy child. PFDs certainly are not welcome by sun worshippers. People who flock to the open waters often search for that "perfect tan" that could only be hindered by PFD use.

Florida has ranked first in boating fatalities since 2003, and accounted for 10.9% of the total number of U.S. boating deaths in 2006 (USCG, 2008). March, May, and July have the highest reported boating accidents, with most events occurring between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. The primary cause of death from

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drowning in the past two years has been from a capsized craft or from a passenger overboard. From 2001 to 2006, 60% of boating accident deaths were from drowning (FWC, 2008a). These victims were primarily male gender, over the age of 36 years, and able to swim (Rehwinkel, 2008). The Florida boater's guide recommends wearing a PFD, but the law only requires use by personal watercraft users, water skiers, and children under 6 years of age on a vessel less than 26 feet in length (FWC, 2008b). Regulation of PFD use is mostly a joint effort between the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the United States Coast Guard who cannot provide the resources to cover the vast open waters and the inlets that surround Florida. Both of these regulatory agencies also maintain boating fatality data through accident reports and are keenly aware of the need for better passenger security. Currently, the FWC supports legislation mandating the age of child PFD wearers to be increased from 6 years to 10 years of age. Unfortunately, this mandate will not target young adult and middle-aged individuals 24 to 60 years of age for whom drowning ranks highest (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

Making PFD use mandatory is the only solution in a boating environment where the social norm is absence of PFD wearers. Current U.S. Coast Guard approved PFDs are lightweight and some are even inflatable, allowing the wearer to move around more comfortably, yet providing the same security as larger, bulkier PFDs. All boaters on Florida's waters who are under 21 years of age are required to attend either an in-person or on-line boating course that reviews these optional PFDs and advocates for their use. Educational awareness campaigns have been implemented in Florida and these results are pending. Awareness campaigns target those individuals who are already educated and aware, but are either fearless or negligent when it comes to water security and human lives. Most boating fatalities occur on

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watercraft that are less than 21 feet long such as ones used primarily for cruising or fishing (USCG, 2008).

Not only does PFD use decrease fatalities, it also has a favorable effect on injury severity for both operator and passenger in the event of a boating accident (McCarthy & Talley, 2001). This injury control measure is especially important to consider when costs of medical care for those individuals who survive a drowning, and who are incapacitated due to their injuries are calculated.

We are now at the point where Florida legislators need to enact mandatory PFD use for all boaters in Florida. The same life saving benefit that we have witnessed with motor vehicle seatbelts also can be realized with analogous PFD legislation.

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