
Brief History of *Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen* (The Society to Rescue People from Drowning)

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From June 26 until 29, 2002, the World Congress on Drowning was held in Amsterdam. More than 500 participants from over 40 countries joined in an intensive program. The congress was initiated by the *Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen*, the Dutch Society to Rescue People from Drowning. The Society was founded in 1767 and is the first organization to get involved in the resuscitation of drowning people [1]. The publication of this *Handbook on Drowning* provides a good opportunity to give a brief history of the Society.

A drowning victim is often referred to as “near dead.” Although it is only relatively recent that we have learned resuscitation measures, attempts to help drowning victims have a long history. An illustration dating back to 1237 BC shows the king of Aleppo being held upside down by two helpers after being rescued from the river Orontes. Apparently, even more than 3,000 years ago, people had the idea that doing something is important to save a life: hold the victim upside down or pump his belly. Although such treatment would be deemed inappropriate today, the principle of taking some initiative, any initiative, to save a life is still the slogan of the Society:

Do something!

In the centuries that followed, this attitude changed. In a law dating from 1476, Mary of Burgundy ruled:

You may pull the body out of the water, but if he appears dead, then leave his feet in the water.

A penalty of 30 florins was imposed if a body was removed from the water before the coroner had had the opportunity to inspect it. In these days the legal aspects, is the drowning the result of a criminal act, was more important than the

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humanitarian aspect. The problem in those days was also that people did not know how to tell whether a person was dead or not, with the result they did not consider the possibility of resuscitating the “near dead.”

On October 7, 1766, Abraham Calcoen, bailiff (*baljuw*: country tutor) in Amstelland (the greater area of Amsterdam), published an article on drowning and mentioned the need to lend a helping hand. His advice was to assist the drowning victim by:

- Warming him up in front of a big fire
- Opening his intestines through the rear with a pair of bellows or a tobacco pipe or a sharp knife
- Rubbing him warm with a woolen cloth or a brush
- Letting his blood
- Rubbing his head with alcohol

The Amsterdam merchant Jacob de Clercq sympathized with the victims whose fate it was to be taken out of the water without verifying whether they were actually dead and who were then buried. De Clercq discussed this with the Baptist vicar Cornelis van Engelen, who also wrote for the magazine *The Philosopher*. On August 24, 1767, van Engelen published an article in that magazine providing detailed information on how best to help a drowning person. Van Engelen propagated that rescuers should be given a financial reward and that the costs of housing a drowning victim and his medical care costs should be paid.

This issue of the magazine *The Philosopher* was distributed widely throughout the Netherlands and resulted in many reactions.

On October 26, 1767, de Clercq and van Engelen invited a number of Amsterdam dignitaries to the house of de Clercq to further develop the ideas set out in van Engelen’s article in *The Philosopher*. That same day, the Society was founded and held its first Board meeting. The aims of the Society were:

- To encourage saving of lives and resuscitation of drowning victims
- To promote knowledge on resuscitation methods

It was decided that bronze, silver, or gold medals, as well as certificates of appreciation, were to be awarded and that financial compensation would be paid in some cases.

The article by van Engelen was summarized in a *Proclamation*, of which 10,000 copies were distributed throughout the country. An unforeseen drawback of this initiative was that “rescuers” issued fake reports only to receive a monetary reward.

A positive result was that within a few years, 28 local and provincial governments in the Netherlands issued decrees. Another positive result was that the idea spread rapidly to other countries. In 1768, a decree was issued in Venice, Italy. Also in 1768, the *Gesellschaft zur Rettung Ertrunkener* was founded in Hamburg, Germany. Around 1772, a society with similar aims was founded in France. In 1774, the Humane Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Dead by Drowning was founded in England. Switzerland followed in 1775 and Denmark in 1797.

Initially, the Board meetings of the Society were held every 3 weeks. As of 1861, the Board is assisted by a secretarial department and the frequency of Board meetings was scaled down to 4 or 5 each year.

For the first 75 years, the Board meetings were held at various locations, usually in Amsterdam guesthouses or inns. In 1846, the Society acquired the stately building at Rokin 114, at one of the canals in the center of Amsterdam. Ever since, Board meetings have been held there. At the end of the twentieth century, this building was sold, but the Society has the perpetual right to use the meeting room. Effectively, nothing in the room has changed since 1846.

The same holds true for the structure of the Board of the Society. Soon after their appointment, new members of the Board become Chairman of the Society and remain so for 2 years. Tradition has it that after his resignation, the former Chairman remains an ordinary and thereafter an honorary member of the Board. On average, members have remained on the Board for 20 years. Seven Board members stayed on for more than 40 years. On September 10, 2012, the Society held its 2,637th Board meeting.

The Society would not be able to do its work without the help of its Advisory Board members. These are medical doctors who advise the Board on rescue cases at every meeting. In the course of the past 245 years, more than 6,900 awards have been granted to rescuers. That is an average of some 30 per year. Recently, a study has published on the effects of lay rescuers on the outcome of drowning victims. This study was based on 289 reports that had been received by the Society between 1999 and 2004 [2].

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw an increasing number of reports involving fatal and nonfatal drowning of physically challenged persons driving so-called scooter mobiles. In the Netherlands, the number of scooter mobiles has risen significantly to 125,000 in 2011. It is expected that this number will rise to 250,000 by 2015. Obviously, this has to do with an aging population and advanced medical care. In 2011, the Society commissioned a preliminary study to this phenomenon by students of the University of Rotterdam.

Nowadays, in addition to its initial aims, the Society focuses on:

- Instruction in schools
- Video material
- Television advertising
- Articles in magazines

Also, the Society awards grants and subsidies to scientists and researchers.

Of course, the Society was a major initiator and financial supporter of the World Congress on Drowning held in 2002.

In 2007, the Society decided to institute a special medal (“legpenning”) to be awarded to persons who have rendered an extraordinary contribution to the prevention, rescue, or treatment in cases of drowning. The well-known Amsterdam artist Elisabeth Varga, who sadly passed away in October 2011, was commissioned to design a bronze medal.

This medal was first awarded in 2009 to Harald Vervaecke (1950) of Belgium, Secretary-General, among many other functions, of the International Life Saving Federation (ILSF), internationally renowned in his field and a major contributor to the organization of the 2002 World Congress on Drowning.

In 2012, the second medal has been awarded to Pete Peterson, who has initiated The Alliance for Safe Children (TASC).

The Society was founded 245 years ago, but is nevertheless still young at heart and intends to continue its work to prevent drowning, as well as to rescue and treat drowning victims.

It all started locally in Amsterdam in 1767, back in the eighteenth century. Today the organization is active throughout the Netherlands. During the 245 years of its existence, the Society has made an important contribution to the development of methods and treatments that help to prevent drowning. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this contribution is still needed, even after 245 years.

Finally, we are gearing up to the year 2017, when the Society will be 250 years old.

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