Two eventing deaths in two months: just how risky is horse riding?

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The death of 17-year-old horse rider Olivia Inglis in March this year rocked the global equestrian world. The hashtag #rideforolivia went viral.

Not two months later, 19-year-old Caitlyn Fischer died in a similar event.

Both girls were experienced riders who specialised in eventing, which is an Olympic equestrian event in which Australian horses and riders excel internationally. It comprises three phases of competition: dressage, cross country and showjumping.

Both girls died on the cross-country course, from rotational falls. The cross-country phase is considered particularly dangerous as it involves galloping over solid obstacles on mixed terrain. Falls in this phase typically occur from height and at speed.

Where a horse clips a solid fence and falls rotationally, there is a risk of it falling on – and killing – the rider.

The tragedy of their deaths is undisputable. But just how risky is eventing, and horse riding in general? A riding clearing a jump in a local eventing event.

One researcher documented rider deaths in all levels of eventing across the globe. She identified 59 confirmed rider deaths between 1993 and 2015. That is an estimated global average of 2.68 deaths per year from eventing.

A highly cited article, published in 1999, by Australian trauma specialist Dr Bruce Paix claimed that eventing was more dangerous than motorcycle or car racing. Paix found eventing 70 times more dangerous than horse riding in general and 180 times at the highest levels.

A single misstep can be very costly when eventing.
In Australia alone, there are an estimated 20 deaths from horse-related injury every year. Compare this with an average of 1.7 deaths from shark attack. Every time a rider mounts a horse, there is a possibility they may fall off.

Seeing horses as unpredictable is a risk factor for horse-related injury in itself. That is, if it activates complacency.

While no sentient being is fully predictable (humans included), a number of technical controls can be introduced to reduce the likelihood and consequence of an accident, injury or fatality.