



David Sherlock's regular soundings from the learning and training frontline

Going safely to work

That level of risk; that element of uncertainty when you left home each morning about whether you'd make it home alive that night, would appal every one of us and our families today. We are fortunate that, in the past century or so, we have reached a point where there is no need for us to be made of quite such stern stuff as our great-grandfathers.

With the Adult Learning Inspectorate we were proud to win the British Safety Council's top 'five star' rating and their international sword of honour. Receiving a real sword as a reward for managing safety at work seemed ironic but that's by the by. We were both extraordinarily proud of the achievement and conscious that we had had only to do some fairly commonsense things to secure an excellent safety record and the awards to go with it.

What we did was this. With the help of consultants and our staff, we isolated the few highest risks of accidents. These were car driving, lone working (inspectors often work evenings, visiting far-flung learning centres), and unanticipated visits to high-risk environments like warehouses full of the silent killers that are fork-trucks. To reduce the driving hazards we ensured that everyone had cars no more than four years old and took a biennial defensive driving course and test, delivered by former police advanced drivers. Lone working was covered principally by ensuring that lead inspectors always knew where their team members were and checked them out and back in while on inspection. We coped with hazardous surprises by having the lead inspector formally risk-assess every place that team members would visit, before the start of every inspection.

Other than getting all the controls in place, training people and setting an example from the top, this was pretty much *it*. It didn't seem too onerous to any of us.

Uncertain homecomings

The importance of the effort really came home to me when we went to Goldsmiths' Hall to receive our sword. The Deputy Director of the Health and Safety Executive read out an annual report from one of the first factory inspectors in the North-West, in the

1870s. It centred on the excellent achievement of a chemical works which had reduced the number of deaths to seven, from nine in the previous year. That level of risk; that element of uncertainty when you left home each morning about whether you'd make it home alive that night, would appal every one of us and our families today. We are fortunate that, in the past century or so, we have reached a point where there is no need for us to be made of quite such stern stuff as our great-grandfathers. Sudden death is front page news, not an inside column-inch.

For this reason – gratitude to have been neither a victim nor responsible for the death or mutilation of someone I cared about – I am impatient with the 'Daily Mail tendency': "Health and safety? Political correctness gone mad!"

A voluntary triumph

We are fortunate to have the TUC as a client (possibly confirming the worst suspicions of Daily Mailites). Among its many other tasks on behalf of the trade union movement, the TUC trains health and safety representatives. A volunteer force, it seems likely that these many thousands of guardians of their colleagues' interests are at least as effective in reducing calamities at work as their salaried safety officer counterparts in management. They are right there, where accidents and long-term occupational diseases threaten; they are very well trained; they are enthusiasts; and they have had the force of law behind them since 1977.

The TUC's publications are superb. Even if you find health and safety at work less than compelling at first sight, you would find something to interest you in the 300-odd pages of their training manual *Hazards at Work*. Take some of the statistics:

- According to the International Labour Organisation (of the United Nations), 2,000,000 people die in workplace accidents every year, worldwide
- These same workers of the world suffer 270,000,000 injuries and 160,000,000 occupational illnesses
- Hazardous substances killed 440,000 workers last year and every year, 100,000 of them dying from contact with asbestos whose deadliness has been known for a half-century or so.

workplaces'. Three cheers for well-informed self-help!

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Loose talk costs lives

Here's the good news. In the 30 years since the 1977 Regulations, workplace deaths in the UK have fallen by three-quarters. Nevertheless, that still amounts to 212 people who fail to walk back in through the door at the end of the day's work and who never will again. We might reasonably ask those who mock a concern to improve health and safety at work whether they would have been willing to make their point to the 636 families who would otherwise have been bereaved last year or, indeed, to those 212 who still were. We might also ask them to comfort those left behind by the nearly 2,000 people who died of the agonising asbestos-linked cancer, mesothelioma; still something like 2 per cent of the world's total despite the long-standing ban on using the wretched stuff in this country and the care taken in its removal from old buildings. The sins and carelessness of our fathers live on for at least another generation.

We are plagued by the loose talk of unthinking journalists who play to the basest and most callous. There are hard choices in this as in all other social questions: whether to constrain thoughtless talk and thoughtless action – always to a chorus of criticism – or whether to let sentimental libertarianism rip. I know where I stand; alongside the thousands who have survived thanks to some sensible regulation and the volunteer union safety representatives. In the inelegant words of the government Health and Safety Executive, 'Workplaces where workers are involved in taking decisions about health and safety are safer and healthier