

Health and Safety

John & Fiona Earle

John pricked his finger on the pin of a Remembrance Day poppy. Fiona said that it would soon be impossible to buy poppies with pins for reasons of health and safety.

We both enjoy nonsense – and yet her remark was foresight, not nonsense. The next day, there was a letter in *The Times* from an ex-R.A.F. squadron leader. He explained that he had been trained to parachute into dangerous situations – and to look after himself when he got there. He had just been unable to buy a poppy plus pin ... you've guessed it – for reasons of health and safety!

Another correspondent did not get the parasol on her cocktail – health and safety!! Yet a sizzling hot dish was put in front of her 6-year-old daughter.



Why not pause here, and see if this triggers off a whole lot of thoughts and memories in your mind.

Grow by Experience

Have you ever tried to walk in a field, in a straight line, with your eyes blindfolded? We have tried this up at Haileybury with the grandchildren, and found that we would

probably walk 25-30 yards in the direction we intended, and then swerve off track – and be quite unaware of the error. That is what happens when you get no information from your eyes.

If you go walking or skiing on snow and/or in cloud, you can be completely misled as to the lie of the land. In whiteout conditions you get misinformation from your eyes. John has done this, in a group, with a trained leader. We were falling down as we wrongly thought the ground was sloping, although it was completely flat!

When we got back to base, the leader said "I think you've all increased in stature by skiing in the whiteout." He was right. True, one of us could have fallen and hurt a wrist or an ankle, but he was making the point that we had to experience and handle danger to know our limits. Here, health did not depend on safety but on understanding difficulties and danger.

Surgical League Tables

Let's look at surgery. Some years ago, the death rate after surgery was getting discussed. League tables were suggested.

Obviously no one wants a ham-fisted operator, but what about this? A patient may be desperately ill, and, if nothing is done, he is certain to die. An operation is his only hope – and that may not succeed.

An intensely humane and skilled surgeon would say, "Well I think we ought to give him a chance." Naturally, this surgeon's death rate will be above average – but if you were ill, would you like someone to give you a chance ... or prefer the surgeon to turn away? Such a surgeon, naturally, would have 'better' figures regarding post-operative deaths.

Here health depends on a calculated risk.

Day to day hazards

In Nepal, we see children – lean children -walking to school along a track. There is no road, hence no cars. Here, many are taken by car, which is probably safer as there are so many cars. In fact it may be more a matter of convenience – or poor planning of footpaths – and not all the children are lean and healthy.

At communion services there are usually sidesmen standing by the steps into the chancel. Surely it is a matter of courtesy – no more and no less – to help someone who is handicapped by blindness, someone carrying a load of years, or someone who finds steps a problem for any reason. To think in terms of 'health and safety' diminishes the value of courtesy.

In Rory Stewart's book "Occupational Hazards" an Iraqi asks Stewart what religion is. Stewart says he doesn't know. The Iraqi, surprised, says that religion is respect for another person as we were all made by one God.

Tackling the problem

Perhaps the real trouble with the phrase 'Health and Safety' is that it may reduce our respect for skilled judgement: that it may be used as an excuse for doing nothing.



How should we respond to people who work to extend their abilities, even if their intentions appear dangerous to us? The reflex thought of 'Health and Safety' can be a refuge, like rolling ourselves in a blanket and failing to view the positive angle of their intentions carefully.

The old Boy Scouts motto "Be Prepared" is a great deal more positive. It is far safer to teach people to deal with danger than to seek to remove all hazards.



We do recognise the value of 'Health and Safety' in industry where toxic substances are concerned. Here, good management means substituting a toxic substance with a less toxic one if possible, containing the substance and giving proper training to the workforce.

Next time you are in a graveyard, keep an eye open for a new stone. The lettering may not be clear but somewhere there may be a stone saying

" MMON S NSE DIED BY P ISONING BY HEALTH AND SAFETY 2004"

Poisoning or imprisoning – this surely is an unworthy end to Common Sense that has been the Queen of our thoughts since the days of ancient Egypt.

P.S. Our local butcher told us yesterday that he is no longer allowed to sell his "Welsh Dragon" sausages – Trades Descriptions Act. They contain no Dragon!!!

