

Total safety: fiction or a prospect for the future?

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It is remarkable that all industrial nations have drastically reduced the number of serious work and road traffic accidents, but the number of accidents in the home and in leisure areas has either increased or is stagnating at a high level.

The reason for this contrasting development is obvious: workplace health and safety protection and road safety belong within the field of responsibility of institutions; prevention is regarded as a public and pan-social task. However, household and leisure accidents seem rather to be classified as a private matter, a concern for each individual himself. Moreover, the increasing orientation towards leisure pursuits means that dangerous sports such as hang-gliding, paragliding, bungee jumping, free climbing, mountain biking, roller-skating, skiing and snowboarding have increased at an almost explosive rate.

For the accident victims, the economy, society itself and the insurance companies, all this can be reduced to a common denominator. Whether people have accidents at their place of work, in road traffic, in the home or in leisure areas, every accident results in serious human suffering and considerable economic and business costs.

Against this background, the state, the economy, society and, above all, committed safety experts simply cannot withdraw to the complacent point of view that a segmented approach to safety work is the measure of all things. Total safety is by no means a fiction, but rather an absolute must. Anyone who relies on the prevention measures at the workplace and in road traffic resulting in safety-conscious behaviour in the home and in leisure areas as a kind of side-effect is ill advised. It is equally futile to hope for proper, functioning self-regulation in this field.

Safety does not play a central role in the consciousness of most people. It is always a question of 'someone else', and if one is personally affected then, as a rule, the whole event is assigned to the category of 'sheer bad luck'. It is astonishing that the transfer of safety-conscious behaviour from the place of work to an adequate form of behaviour in road traffic only functions to a certain extent. It is even more surprising that virtually no transfer takes place to the behaviour in the home or leisure areas. The reason may be that, at work, social controls are extremely strong, in road traffic they are less influential and in the home or leisure areas they are almost entirely lacking.

A further reason is that – at least in Germany – detailed risk analyses have been developed for companies which make specific prevention work possible. In road traffic, prevention measures are oriented primarily towards the main causes of the

accidents. In the home/leisure field, virtually no activity is currently taking place, although the number of accident fatalities and injuries in this sector is now higher than the total of accident victims in work and traffic accidents combined.

If we really want to protect people from accidents and health risks, we must adopt a new attitude. We must develop concepts which are suitable for protecting people from accidents and health risks in all fields of life. This means that we must analyse the entire human – technology – environment system, to develop appropriate counter-strategies on all conceivable levels. In the process, we can refer back to positive experiences gained from the employment of multi-disciplinary teams in the work and road safety sectors. It has become evident that technical measures alone, for instance, are not sufficient to solve the existing problems, because optimised technology leads not infrequently to risk compensation, e.g. the anti-block system and the stability control in cars which encourage people to rely on the technology and so to venture up to or even beyond the physical driving limits.

We – I mean in particular the established work and road safety institutions – must also distance ourselves from trying to influence people with well-intentioned information or behaviour tips. The latest investigations in Germany have shown that road users do not lack knowledge, but the ability to cope with daily stress factors in road traffic. The situation at the place of work and in the leisure sector is presumably similar. For this reason alone, it is indispensable to involve those affected – that is, the employees and the road users – in the conception of new measures.

In Germany, we have developed a concept which contains both integral and participatory approaches. This so-called 'motor pool consultancy concept' deliberately refers to all the various areas of the participants' lives and encourages them to find their own solutions to any problems. We have tested this concept in several companies and the results were extremely positive. The participants reported that their attitude to safety in all areas of life had changed. The company owners also were in favour of the project, because the change in the safety awareness of the employees led, among other things, to cost savings.

Unfortunately, the overall evaluation of all the projects has been delayed, so I can not provide you with scientifically-based data. Regardless of that, however, I feel that the future belongs to an integral and participatory approach in preventive work. So total safety is truly not a fiction any more, but rather a necessary prospect.

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