

# Risky business

The rise of the proprietary tree risk assessment package and the case, again, for commonly agreed standards.

I am motivated to write about the increasing number of 'proprietary' tree risk assessment systems and how I perceive these to be both a symptom and inevitable consequence of the lack of progress we (as an industry and profession) have made to bring clarity and a standardised approach to the subject. To be fair and equitable at the outset, many of my comments could of course equally apply to those of us that take our own approach.

From a member's perspective, my ongoing concerns recently came to a head, when on one hand we have a relationship with an organisation that advocates one such proprietary system and on the other, recently provided a platform to allow the promotion of another. This may seem trivial to some readers, and I appreciate the remit to educate and inform, but in my opinion such arrangements under the Association's umbrella bring both tacit endorsement and ironically more confusion.

In a more global context, this is compounded by the many different interpretations of good practice generally: particularly framework documents and inspection requirements (levels, experience, qualification etc.) necessary to fulfil the duty holder's fundamental responsibilities.

It's important to clarify that I'm not looking to take issue with any specific system. If you use one and it works for you and your client(s) (and will protect you both if things go wrong), it's clearly a useful tool. I have no doubt that they are all motivated by good intentions and in the absence of clear industry guidance, it's inevitable that people will want to bring consistency and clarity from a state of confusion. In a free market, I also acknowledge the right to trade and make a living.

Unfortunately, it seems to me that in a professional context it is possible to 'ride into town', set up any stall you want and sell a product regardless of any formal peer review or quality and qualification assurance process etc. Whilst many may welcome the chance to be presented with a range of choices and approaches I increasingly see this as indicative of a lack of clear guidance, leadership and governance (particularly for something that is such a core arboricultural undertaking). In the absence of substantive peer-informed evolution, the cart starts to drive the horse and change occurs through publicity and loud voices. This lack of attention may potentially lead to less than ideal practice becoming industry-accepted norms.

I suggest that we can better gauge how

normalised we are becoming in this regard by applying the same criteria to other professions. Would we be comfortable putting our faith in a surgeon, pilot, lawyer or solicitor etc. who has:

- no formal qualifications,
- only an attendance certificate from a workshop;
- often 12 months' experience or less; and
- advised us on outcomes, giving the impression of academic and scientific rigour, with no deep understanding of the constituent facts?

I appreciate that I am not entirely comparing like for like but despite the value and importance of trees, are we not inadvertently supporting a position where persons can do whatever they want with no formal qualification and minimal experience? Consequently, at work we are at risk of accepting a lesser standard than those we expect of the professions and trades we utilise in our daily lives.

Reluctantly for the sake of ourselves and clients, I come to the conclusion that if we want to move forward with a common understanding we need to revisit the BS 8516 (Recommendations for tree safety inspection) concept and/or support the development of an ICoP (Industry Code of Practice) document along the lines of ANSI A300 (Tree Risk Assessment Standard a. Tree Failure – Part 9).

In any event, these are issues that I, as a member, would be expecting the Association, as the voice of arboriculture, to be speaking loudly about on my behalf.

**Jez Lawton MArborA MICFor**

## A response to Jez Lawton from Simon Richmond, Senior Technical Officer

Thank you for raising this issue of perceived 'lack of progress', as it is part of the long-term evolution of our industry and, as you point out, is seen as a 'chronic' problem. While it will be some time before the arboriculture industry is recognised as an established profession with members that can be compared with the modern surgeon, pilot, lawyer, solicitor, etc., we must aspire to professionalise.

The specific concerns about 'the rise of the proprietary risk assessment package' are more complex to answer, as we need the inspiration and motivation of innovative individuals to provoke and stimulate the industry in order to move forwards, towards that very professionalism which will define standards.

The fact is, we don't know the best way to evaluate the risk from trees, or parts of trees, falling. We don't even fully agree about the biomechanical functions trees perform or the organic and ecological mechanisms which allow them to adapt to natural changes as they age, let alone the best way to assess individual trees; but we

are constantly, passionately learning. This we should celebrate, and this, perhaps, does compare to, for example, medical surgery: progress in the understanding of human anatomy went through a similar exploration, discussion and extreme disagreement amongst innovative, passionate and motivated individuals 100–200 years ago. The surgeon in the late 19th century was a much less well regarded professional than his modern-day equivalent. The word 'quack' springs to mind. How about those early aviators? Mavericks and madmen, most of them – but passionate. And lawyers – don't start me!

The development of standards for any given discipline takes time, requires broad agreement of terms of reference, experimentation, trials (and of course, tribulations). It is not helpful to be exclusive in this process; rather, it requires the utmost transparency, inclusivity and encouragement.

The Association is concerned with setting standards for our industry; it is one of our aims and objectives and we take this responsibility

seriously. We aim to consider current research and development objectively and to allow access, via our membership and other channels, to peer review from as wide a group as possible. Inevitably, this also sometimes involves selective, subjective judgement that not everyone will agree with but we always welcome constructive discussion. However, we are not an academic research institution and what we cannot, and must not, do is become dictatorial about a subject that is still evolving.

Arguably, there is general agreement developing about the approach society should take to the evaluation of risk from trees (ref: National Tree Safety Group, *Common Sense Risk Management of Trees*), albeit there's a way to go yet. We also understand, from the arboricultural professional's point of view, that increasing our knowledge of biomechanics, ecology and the processes of hollowing, dysfunction, etc. will continually improve the judgements we make about individual trees. A standardised methodology for the inspection process may well be a useful addition to the armoury of tools at our disposal but there will never be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution to this subject.

**Passion – and patience.**