

We must stop this: why accidents keep happening

I am motivated to write this after reading the article “Second Fatality in 12 months: this has to stop” (The ARB Magazine Issue 76, spring 2017) and subsequent membership request to participate in a H&S questionnaire. I stress at the outset that my comments are general to the issue of why accidents keep happening, and not specific to the tragic cases described. As you will read below, it is my assertion that this could have been written at any point during the last 20 years.

After many years involvement at the sharp end, (development and delivery of training and certification standards; working with stake holders, investigating accidents, and acting as a witness for HSE etc.) I consciously decided to take a back seat. The main reason for this decision was an increasing sense of déjà vu. Over a 20 year period, it seemed to me that the same fundamental question(s) ‘why do accidents keep happening?’ were being asked time and time again.

In tandem, my work as a trainer and assessor led me to conclude, that (particularly in arboriculture) standards of chainsaw use, both on the ground and in trees was generally poor. As a trainer, most of my time was spent ‘reminding’, supposedly already competent, chainsaw users how to safely start and operate (on the ground and aloft) their machines; before we could contemplate starting work on the new skills they were endeavouring to acquire.

Over time the faces of those representing the various stakeholders would change, but the same question kept arising. Frustratingly, the answer(s) provided were also broadly similar, yet over the years, nothing substantive appears to have changed. Indeed latterly, I considered we were heading towards a perfect storm of increased accident rates, particularly given the:-

- Increased use of platforms (not the use of platforms per se, but minimal provisions for operator training, thus facilitating the poorly prepared to easily work at height with chainsaws)
- ‘Race to the bottom’ created by increased commercialism and pressure to get persons ‘on the job’ with minimal time and investment
- Lack of ‘value’ placed upon trees and the people who work with trees and associated cultural and behavioural mind-set of many workers
- No significant change to a raft of very basic certification (including first aid)
- Lack of robust supervisory qualifications and suitable candidates to fulfil the role

Of course, when accidents do occur, a formal process of investigation can tease out underlying and root causes for that particular case. However, I suggest that individual accidents tend to be more symptomatic of the fact that we have not adequately grasped

the fundamental risks from our undertakings. Consequently, it is a combination of similar ‘ingredients’ that conspire to make recipes for disaster. I have endeavoured below, to highlight some of these key factors.

Context:

There appears to be ‘a lot’ of accidents! But throughout a long career, I continue to struggle to establish if this is actually the case, particularly within what we consider to be the professional arboricultural industry. It’s not my intention to downplay accidents, but how can we get these events into a meaningful context without clarifying a few basic facts, including:-

- **Are these accidents happening to professionals who form part of our industry?** What in fact does constitute our industry and profession? A chainsaw certificate? A member of a body such as the AA or ICF?
- **Meaningful statistics?** Where are the published statistics to clearly indicate the need for action within the professional arboricultural industry?
- **Thorough Investigations:** When accidents occur we need the circumstances investigated by a forestry and or arboricultural expert, and the findings made available, otherwise it’s impossible to implement changes from lessons learned.

Existing training and certification provisions:

I am convinced that our training and certification provisions are disproportionately low compared to the high risks of our undertakings.

Considering, the risks from using chainsaws (on the ground and aloft); working at height (from rope or platform); cutting and removal of (variable sizes and weights) timber; and the peripatetic nature of the work environment, it seems reasonable to conclude that these undertakings are often complex in nature, with a high likelihood of life changing consequences if things go wrong. *And this is without even considering site specifics such as overhead and underground services.*

My point is, that to establish safe systems of work, the main control must be the use of highly skilled and prepared personnel. However, despite the raft of industry training and certification provisions, in my opinion these are all very basic. There is no element of ‘time served milestones’ and with very little effort, a new entrant to the industry could obtain chainsaw, tree climbing and platform certification within a matter of months. This is further compounded because we credit these people with time served experience from a very basic foundation. This leads to mistaking experience for proficiency or expertise. As anyone who has listened to me play the guitar would readily testify, you can consistently do things badly for a long time without improvement. In these circumstances, how we will not only

develop advanced skills, but of equal importance, supervisory skills.

I'm not criticising the provisions per se, it is just that we need to accept that they are only a basic, starting point. Unfortunately, it also seems that if an operative holds basic chainsaw and tree climbing certificates, they are virtually legally compliant: even when undertaking more complex operations. I believe that this lack of understanding impacts upon employers (and the self-employed) in terms of a tendency to discharge training responsibilities to 3rd party providers and believing that once the 'certificate' has been obtained, the individual is good to go with minimal further input.

Whilst I applaud the development, time and effort that has gone into establishing the Register of Tree Work Operatives (<http://www.r2register.co.uk/home>) I believe that without mandatory obligations to register (and public awareness of the same) and a robust evidence base for proficiency, it simply lacks the bite to usefully contribute to safer working.

“but I employ less than 5 people, and so....”:

I have heard and read this statement so many times, that I have concluded it has become at best an excuse for complacency and, or ignorance, and at worst a get out of jail free card. In my opinion we should be lobbying for change, to make it mandatory to prepare written contingency plan relevant to the task, site and personnel. Anyone who thinks that this is adding an unnecessary bureaucratic burden to

small businesses, clearly has no concept of the risks involved and likely outcomes if things go wrong. Perhaps compliance in this regard should be a key indicator of a professional operator?

Failure to engage with legislation and good practice:

As an industry we have some very good guidance (e.g. HSE research projects), but it seems we continually fail to get the message out to the sharp end, particularly safe use of top handled chainsaws and compliance with Work at Height Regulations.

Standards of tree care:

Although the main thrust of my points are core health and safety, it is also worth remembering that these persons have to deliver care and attention to our greatest natural assets.

The way forward:

If we conclude that accident rates are unacceptable, and we don't want to be asking why for the next 20 years, the only way I can see significant change happening is to substantially raise the bar in terms of:-

- Accidents investigated by industry experts and findings published.
- Review certification and training to truly reflect the complexity of the tasks and impose milestones upon progression. This should include development of mandatory supervisory qualifications and

first aid relevant to likely accident outcomes.

- Mandatory registration for professional chainsaw users.
- Enforcement and/or prosecution (as appropriate) for non-compliance, in particular if certification is not relevant to the tasks undertaken and or planning, supervisory and rescue provisions are not met.
- Written, (site, tasks and personnel) emergency contingencies should be mandatory regardless of organisation size.
- Companies should be providing near miss and accident statistics

I appreciate that this approach would lead to increased costs, but I suggest that we would ultimately end up with:-

- A more highly skilled and motivated work force
- Reduced accident rates
- Better standards of tree care

The knock on effect would be that our clients and ultimately the public at large would learn to value trees and those who work with them more highly. This also fits in nicely with the mission statements that most of our industry bodies claim to be championing.

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