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Annual report 09

### Welcome to the fifth issue of *Connect*

The holiday season is now well and truly in full swing, and parents are dragging their children around zoos, museums and theme parks in an attempt to give their loved ones a little education and entertainment (and, of course, to lure them from their TVs and Wii consoles). So spare a thought for IOSH member Andrew Böber, who's the health and safety manager for London Zoo. *Connect* catches up with Andrew in our *Spotlight feature*, where troublesome little monkeys are an occupational hazard.

Still on the topic of children, there's an interesting discussion thread on our [member forum](#) about what IOSH is doing for the health and safety practitioners of tomorrow and, in particular, the suggestion of a youth branch network. While we don't have a formal youth network in the pipeline, there are several IOSH initiatives already out there aimed at educating schoolchildren and teenagers on workplace safety, from the Edinburgh Branch's support of the [Risk Factory](#) to the [Workplace Hazard Awareness Course](#). Is your branch or group thinking about getting involved in awareness training for local children? If so, [drop us a line](#).

Not many people share their workplace with Harrier Jets. Mike Slyne from RAF Wittering works with bomb disposal teams and soldiers armed with machine guns on a daily basis – he's also quite handy when it comes to drain covers. Find out more in our [Dangerously Safe](#) slot.

The holiday season also means 'silly season' and with it comes daft health and safety stories splashed over the newspapers. One tells how a Scottish council has banned dog obedience classes at a town hall over health and safety fears or, more accurately, worries over being sued due to someone slipping on dog mess. Read Ray Hurst's comments about this and other topics in this issue's [Quote Me](#).

Happy reading, and if you have something interesting to say, or want to comment on anything you see in *Connect*, please [contact me](#).

**Shaun Gibbons**  
e-Editor

### Dangerously safe: planes, drains and automobiles

**In the second of our 'Dangerously safe' features, we catch up with one of the health and safety professionals who operate in more challenging environments and circumstances.**

As soon as you set foot on the RAF Wittering base you see that safety is everywhere. But on a military site, things are different – and you're sharply reminded of this when faced with two service personnel guarding the entrance armed with rifles. *Connect* talks to Mike Slyne, the Safety, Health and Environment Adviser for approximately 2,000 service personnel, their families and Ministry of Defence civil servants.

The type of environment Mike works in is a long way from that of a normal business. You could say that he manages the health and safety of a small town, with the addition of a few Harrier jets thrown into the equation!

Mike began working life as an industrial engineer in 1968. After going on a safety representative training course, he soon started using the technique of job safety analysis, and this saw the start of his career in health and safety. In 2003 Mike took on his position at RAF Wittering in Cambridgeshire.

Communication is an extremely important part of Mike's role as he works in partnership with others to assist the station in its management of health, safety and environment. He is in contact every day with the various specialists at Wittering, from transport through to ejector seats. This can make for a very diverse job.

Mike said:

“One day you could be working with bomb disposal specialists, and the next you could be dealing with an ill-fitting drain cover... or even a problem in the station’s bowling alley.”

From a health, safety and environmental protection point of view, the MoD takes a very proactive approach and has a training organisation to make sure station personnel are competent to carry out their duties. An annual refresher brief takes place on station, as well as one-day inductions on health, safety, fire and flight for anyone new to the site.

“These training sessions are extremely important for awakening awareness in people,” Mike explained. “Many may be new to the station but they have far more knowledge and experience of the hazards, risks and controls associated with their duties than I do.”

FOD (foreign object damage) costs the MoD millions of pounds a year. People going into aircraft manoeuvring areas have to self-certify that their car tyres are free from debris – if one small stone embedded in the tyre ended up on the runway it could cause a major accident to a plane resulting in injury or even death to aircrew. Sticking to strict tool control is also fundamental to all those who work on or near the aircraft. The base uses a system to make sure that tools are counted out and back in.

Part of Mike’s job involves dealing with environmental issues. Even in his office, Mike is often forced to raise his voice to make himself heard. But having to compete with the roaring engines of a Harrier jet is natural to him now, as it probably is with the residents beneath the flight paths they use.

Mike said:

“Unfortunately nothing can be done about the jets – they make noise! The flight circuits around the airfield are designed to cause the least impact on people. We monitor these circuits but other than that we can’t really do anything else as the activity is a crucial part of training.”

In 1996, the MoD launched GEMS, a scheme that recognises and rewards ideas which are put into practice. The scheme encourages all personnel, ex-employees and contractors to put forward ideas for improving procedures. As a result of GEMS, RAF Wittering has introduced four major method improvements to manual handling tasks in the past two years, following ideas from staff. There are 30 trainers as well as manual handling specialists on station.

Slips, trips and falls are the most common cause of accidents.

“Sometimes it can be hard trying to get people to understand what the risks are here on the station,” Mike said. “They are eventually going to be deployed to places such as Afghanistan where they will be dodging bullets, so what’s a hole in the road in comparison to that?”

This is why officers, commanding flight and line managers try to make sure that everyone knows about health and safety, because although a trip may be minor in comparison to being in a war zone, getting an injury could potentially put a member of the service out of action. With this in mind, the Wittering team works hard to maintain a strong safety culture among the 2,000 people stationed at the base.

Mike gets involved in pre-deployment training for the airmen. Again, communication has a key role as Mike needs to be kept in the loop about everything. The safety of these practices is taken very seriously. For example, before tents are pitched, CAT scans are done on the area to avoid the risk of going through a cable. Nothing is done by half measure in the MoD, Mike explains.

“Their military approach encompasses safety, health and environment by the nature of what they are, and what they do. It’s a real privilege to work at and be associated with RAF Wittering, where every day is a learning day.”

#### Factfile:

- RAF Wittering dates back to 1916 and is one of the oldest air bases in the country
- The station is home to 2,050 Royal Air Force and Royal Navy military personnel and Ministry of Defence civilians. Up to 100 sub-contractors work on the base on an average day
- The base includes the Joint Force Harrier jet as well as a bomb disposal squadron

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#### Spotlight: never work with children and animals

**Spare a thought for Andrew Böber, Occupational Safety and Health Manager for the ZSL London Zoo, who is dealing with the height of the school holiday season and a few more little monkeys than he’d bargained for. Connect went to meet him...**

Andrew is running a little late. An irate mother has been on the telephone claiming that her daughter wasn’t feeling well after a visit to the zoo. Sitting outside the zoo’s café with a cup of strong coffee, Andrew is fairly philosophical about the safety culture we have.

“People automatically have to find blame,” he shrugs. “Companies and councils are reacting to the fear of litigation. It’s all about risk assessments and RIDDOR reports.”

“Here, say, a child has an accident in one of the play areas. There was no negligence, by anyone, and the parents are agreeable. It’s only when they get home do they start to realise that, hey, I’m going

to need time off work to look after my child, who is going to pay me for that? It's then that the issue of financial compensation gets raised. It's at that point when you start to think that the parents will try and find blame."

Andrew gives me a tour of the farm animal enclosure. It's here where children are encouraged to touch and interact with the animals. Yet despite all the hand-cleaning kits provided, as well as signs, some fail to wash their hands afterwards – something, says Andrew, that's down to education.

"We have a large number of urban folk who come here, mostly on school trips. They've never really had the experience and knowledge of animals, apart from pets. These folk aren't aware of the consequences of not washing your hands after handling animals."

Andrew, on the other hand, is more than aware after growing up in a farming community.

"It's just a question of education, and I hope that by making the whole issue of animals and hygiene fun, then they'll pick up on that."

As we were talking, a little girl coming out of the gates of the enclosure ran towards us and tripped. After a couple of seconds of 'will she/won't she cry', the girl dusted herself down and carried on.

"As un-exciting as this might sound, for a 36 acre site, with a lot of open ground, it's trips, slips and falls that are on the top of my list here!" smiles Andrew.

As well as the visitors to keep an eye on, Andrew also has the zoo's employees, in particular, the keepers.

"We've keepers who work with very dangerous animals, and do so on a daily basis. Some of the accidents involving keepers are down to behavioural attitudes," he says. "Others, it's simply silly accidents."

Andrew points to the case of snake handlers.

"They pride themselves on having the skills necessary to handle a snake. And usually snake sticks are used to take control of the snake's head, which takes a lot of skill and experience. But in certain circumstances the use of a stick is not considered as safe as placing a snake in a clear Perspex tube, which is a lot easier. The problem we had, from a safety point of view, is that the handlers used to almost always prefer to use the stick because it reflected their skills as a handler."

The snake handlers are the ones at increased risk, due to the nature of the job. That's why the zoo holds one of the biggest stocks of antivenin outside Australia, costing several thousand pounds a year. The antivenin is actually bought from Australia, and only has a shelf-life of a year, so the stock has to be replenished at least every 12 months.

We met up with the chief snake keeper 'backstage' where some of the more deadly snakes are kept for conservation purposes, and asked him if he's had any close shaves. "My hands are covered in bites," he shows us, "but nothing serious." His last scrape was with a Komodo Dragon which left him with a nasty cut on the hand.

As you'd expect, there are strict protocols in the event of someone being bitten by a poisonous snake.

"In some cases, you'll have less than three minutes to get the antivenin administered, so we have very rigorous guidelines and procedures in place," said Andrew.

And it's not just poisonous snakes to look out for. London Zoo underwent an alert some time ago after the Metropolitan Police had warned the zoo about a man with psychological problems who had escaped the secure ward of a hospital.

"One of the reasons he was put into a secure ward in the first place, was because of his desire to get into the lion enclosure over a decade ago so we had to instigate high-alerts for safety."

As well as the zoo, Andrew is also the Occupational Safety and Health Manager for the Zoological Society of London, which houses labs and hospitals on site for research staff. In fact, Andrew is also a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and travels extensively.

"It's not conventional and linear at the ZSL. I'm not necessarily dealing with just one thing, but I guess that's the reason why I love my job so much."

#### **Factfile:**

- London Zoo opened in 1828
- Last year, the zoo had 1.1 million visitors
- ZSL employs more than 600 people
- There are around 13,000 animals and 650 species housed at the zoo

#### **Links:**

- [London Zoo](#)

**Steve Martin, Health and Safety Officer for Formula 1 team Force India, talks to Connect.**

**What's the hot issue in your sector right now?**

Fire safety.

**What's the most challenging problem you've had to overcome?**

Working at heights.

**What's the best piece of advice you've ever had about working in health and safety?**

Don't try and bite off more than you can chew.

**What advice would you give to someone starting their career in health and safety?**

Keep focused.

**If you could ban the use of one piece of jargon or cliché, what would it be?**

'Don't worry, it'll be all right'.

**If you weren't a health and safety practitioner what would you be?**

Quality assurance manager.

**What do you think about the growing trend of wrapping kids up in cotton wool?**

It's absolutely ridiculous – children need to experience life.

**Do you want to be considered for a 60 Second Interview? Contact the e-Editor.**

**Shaun Gibbons  
e-Editor**

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Quote me

IOSH gets its message across...

**Personnel Today**

Following a recent visit to IOSH, East Midlands MEP Chris Heaton-Harris told *Personnel Today* about IOSH's 'Putting young workers first' campaign.

"It is our responsibility to ensure that our young people are adequately prepared for starting work. With 64 under-19s killed in the workplace in the last decade and over 15,000 suffering major injuries, this is clearly a matter that requires prompt attention."

**Edinburgh Evening News**

IOSH President Ray Hurst hit back at the decision by Midlothian Council to ban dog obedience classes from town halls, due to health and safety reasons.

"Health and safety is not about banning poor pooches from learning how to behave properly in public."

**Health Business**

Ray Hurst championed sensible risk in a feature he wrote for *Health Business* magazine.

"Risk assessment isn't red tape rubbish. It's a practical necessity to keep your hospital, clinic or other premises a safe and healthy place for your most valuable asset – your people!

"Done properly, a risk assessment is a critical tool for any organisation to understand the hazards its people face, and how to minimise the risk of them being hurt. So it's surely something that's worth spending a good amount of time on."

**Norwich Union Risk Services Newsletter**

Ray Hurst issued a warning for all businesses thinking about cutting back on health and safety during the current economic struggles, saying that doing so could have a nasty sting in the tail.

"Those who are tempted to skimp on safety should realise that we now have the new Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act, which may bring with it hefty fines for companies – possibly up to 10 per cent of their global turnover – combined with the prospect of orders requiring publication of conviction and remedial orders.

"I'd urge all organisations to ensure that health and safety is very close to the top of their agenda even during an economic slowdown."

## Education Business

IOSH wrote an article for *Education Business* recently, pointing out that health and safety isn't about getting rid of risk entirely – it's about recognising it.

“One of the key points of health and safety awareness is shared responsibility – not only looking after yourself, but those around you. This is a lesson worth remembering long after leaving the classroom.

“Health and safety awareness should help you respond the right way to hazards – not retreat into a cotton wool cave.”

## Association of Colleges

Ray Hurst recently spoke at the Association of Colleges conference on 'Conkers, colleges and competence'.

“We're continuing to respond to negative media stories about 'elf and safety' banning everything from conkers to hanging baskets. We ask our members to be proactive too and get our positive message across whenever possible.”

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