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## REFLECTIONS

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# A Nice Safe Place to Work

**M**y father was a coal miner in Pennsylvania. I did not expect him to be an inspired career counselor, and he did not disappoint me. When I was a child, I would muse about what I wanted to be when I grew up. He would listen in tolerant silence to my speculations until I would mention—knowingly and ever so casually—that maybe I would get a job in the mine. Unfailingly, no matter how many times I baited him, his Irish temper flared and he would growl, “I’ll break your legs first.”

Old Jack was not a man to beat around the bush. Nor, obviously, did he have a sense of humor about the mines. For the first 12 years of my life we lived within a stone’s throw of the colliery, and he never discouraged me from proving that I could indeed hit it.

In those days the colliery whistle marked the changing work shifts with a blast that could be heard for a mile or more. When it blew at any other time, everyone within earshot knew that it signaled an accident, maybe even a cave-in, and we would run to the shaft below the tippie and await the dreaded word. How bad was it? How many were hurt? Was anyone killed? Who was it? Accidents were a part of life in the mines, but we were never blasé about them. The mines were a damned dangerous place to work.

You know what? Water utilities are damned dangerous places to work. For the past three decades or so, water utilities have had an accident rate about three times higher than gas and electric utilities. Bituminous coal and lignite mining have a better safety record. So do heavy-construction contractors, police departments, and a number of manufacturing industries. Ours is not the worst safety record, but that is small consolation indeed.

The sad thing is that the water industry’s safety record need not be as bad as it is (6.20 lost workday cases reported per 100 full-time employees). The injuries that plague water supply workers are mostly preventable. The most common problem? Back injuries. Not too serious, you say? Not so to the ones injured. And not so to the organization’s budget and productivity. Those 6.20 cases mean 109 lost work days per 100 employees, remember. And who knows what the cost is in medical bills,

workmen’s compensation, and other associated losses?

“Okay, what’s the explanation?” I asked one safety expert. I expected a lecture on the lack of safety procedures, training, supervisory attention, and the like. His answer, born of long experience, was simple. “Management,” he said. If

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safety were a genuine priority for top managers, that would be reflected all the way down the line. Water department staffs know what is expected of them; they know what they will be evaluated on. Safety is not an enforced priority. And that fact is food for any manager’s thought.

No senior utility official is consciously indifferent to the issue of safety, nor is any line supervisor. They all want an injury-free workforce, and they bemoan accidents. But the gap between wanting and achieving a good safety record cannot be bridged by bandages or the most earnest of wishes. Where that gap has been spanned, the bridge was built according to a solid plan based on a serious commitment to an ongoing program of action and supported by a philosophy of operations that takes safety seriously. □

The water industry must purge itself of the least hint of the shoulder-shrugging attitude that “accidents happen” and replace it with the conviction that “safety *must* happen.” AWWA’s safety program is trying to help utility staffs do just that.

The association’s modern-day safety program can be traced to its first safety practices manual, published in 1955 following a survey of the industry taken a few years earlier. (If anything was done in the decades before that, I don’t know about it. I was too busy making my father laugh by lobbing stones at the Beaverdale colliery.) AWWA’s first full-time safety director was hired about 20 years ago. Today, in addition to that manual—M3, now updated—AWWA offers scripts for safety talks (52 of them), 10 training packages on various safety practices, several different seminars, a water utility safety manager course, regional meetings on safety, water utility audits, videos, and other materials. Several other services and programs are being developed. There is no shortage of assistance to AWWA members.

In this era of technological change, numbers of stringent water quality regulations, computerization, and other major innovations, the health and welfare of our workforce remains a fundamental priority. Many utility employees are handling hazardous chemicals, working in trenches and confined spaces, lifting heavy materials, working at physically strenuous jobs. This amounts to a weighty management responsibility, and the record shows that we’ve got to do better at meeting it.

When, in the mid-seventies, I told my father that I had been offered a job at the US Environmental Protection Agency in the Office of Drinking Water, he asked what I would be doing. I prattled on about the new Safe Drinking Water Act and all the work needed to develop regulations and expand state programs and inform water utilities and ensure safe water for the public. He seemed bemused by it all, so I asked him what he thought. “Well,” he said, “it sounds like a nice, safe place to work.”

He might have been right about USEPA, but he would have been wrong about the industry in question. Surely we can do something about that, and let my father rest in peace. □