

Opinion - Martin Samuel

Times

December 27, 2005

43 pensioners fell out of trees. Why? Stupidity

MARTIN SAMUEL

We're not so much going to hell in a handcart, but over a ravine on an out-of-control lawnmower

THIS BEING Bank Holiday Tuesday, by now, more than 40,000 of you will have enjoyed a traditional British Christmas, spent covered in blood or smouldering slightly in one of this nation's many delightful accident and emergency units. This has become such a feature of the holiday season that 40,000 more will be back over new year. A combination of five-year-old tree lights, made in Taiwan and bought cheap from that bloke in the precinct, an ignition problem with the Christmas pud owing to someone tearing the end off the Gordon Ramsay recipe in last week's *Times* and Nana, 84, drawing *Riverdance* from the hat during the annual round of charades, will have combined to remove loved ones from the bosom of the family and place them somewhere else, probably in traction.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) is so concerned with this growing problem that it issued guidelines on such head-scratchers as how to open and play with your presents, and how to cook lunch and then eat it. RoSPA misses the point. It's not the festivities, stupid. It's the stupid, stupid. Stupid people. Doing stupid things. All the stupid time. For life, not just for Christmas. Bungee jumps, doomed do-it-yourself missions, killer pets, unexpected explosions. The Hospital Episode Statistics, published each year, tell of a nation not so much going to hell in a handcart, but over a ravine on an out-of-control lawnmower while battling against a tankful of venomous arthropods.

We hear a lot from the health authorities about smokers and the obese, but the stupid seem to have got away scot-free. Some fat guy, never hurt a soul, keels over in the high street; the NHS behaves as if he's just been caught nicking the PlayStation from the paediatric unit. Terrible man. Smoked 40 a day. Loved a fry-up. I mean, do we have to treat him? Really, should we? Next morning, some joker almost blows his head off with a high-powered patio-cleansing water jet while trying to clear his earwax, and they can't get the blue light out quick enough. I'm not saying we should stop helping fellow citizens in distress, but what about a little parity? If war has been declared on the fat and wheezy, what about the perfectly formed but stupid?

Did you know that last year 343 adults received hospital treatment at our expense after falling from trees? I'll tell you something about those people. They won't be fat. Fat people see a tree, they're not thinking Huckleberry Finn, they're thinking nice bit of shade. It's all these thin idiots who keep getting stuck up trees. That is why a properly streamlined NHS would first install a triage nurse for the stupid. Fat people, you can see coming, smokers you can smell, but these skinny timewasters are getting in under the radar.

"So what's he done? Broke his neck? How did he do that? Fell out of a tree? I see. Some sort of park worker is he, part of his job? An estate agent from Luton? Works out, wanted to show off. Well, I'm sorry, love, but he's on his own. When he comes round ask him what he thought he was playing at."

Or, more to the point, what were you playing at, Grandpa, considering 43 of the 343 who plummeted through foliage last year were over the age of 60. Perhaps they were just young at heart, like the 306 adults who suffered serious injury in falls involving playground equipment, or the 117 adults who plunged from a cliff. Didn't these innocents have mums and dads? Didn't they have a person who

screamed at them from the age of five: "Don't go near the edge!" with eardrum-shattering intensity the moment they so much as wandered near a drop of more than 3ft? Weren't they told the story of the little boy who got all his teeth knocked out from not paying attention near the swings?

Children account for a lot of accidents (5,809 in playgrounds, 1,085 up trees), **but for really spectacular flashes of stupidity, it takes a grown-up.** Of the 12 injuries sustained through contact with venomous spiders and scorpions, not one victim was under 15. A kid sees a scorpion: he knows what to do. Only weird adults in bedsits keep tarantulas as pets. One guy was hurt by a crocodile. I'm presuming zookeeper. But 50 more became entangled with other reptiles. So a reasonable sample managed to cross a dangerous snake or lizard in a country that does not have either, and no clever Dick from a local health authority issued a pompous statement about that. There were six injuries from a prolonged stay in a weightless environment, including one in a person over 75, while 21 people fell foul of their pyjamas.

Getting a gun is difficult in Britain, so accidentally shooting yourself should be even more so — yet 816 citizens managed it, at a rate of more than two per day. Think about that. If this were America, fine. It is easy to shoot yourself in America, or for someone to do it for you. Kids can pull it off, and frequently do. But in Britain we have to really work at redecorating a room with body parts. We need to get a licence, two referees, join a club, provide a letter from a landowner giving permission to shoot, and all this before peering down the barrel for cleaning purposes one morning and losing an ear. Yet 816 noble souls were prepared to go that extra yard in the pursuit of total foolishness. Just as Peter Cook was the comedians' comedian, they are the stupids' stupid. There will be a place in Heaven for them all, if not in their local casualty.

Which, in our new perfect society, is how it should be. For by the time we've vetoed the fat, the nicotine-stained, the gravity-hating, the tree-dwelling, the gun-wielding, nightie-igniters, lizard-fanciers and the 3,972 that still can't keep their thumb away from the hammer, A&E will be free for those spotless souls who have led utterly blameless, completely responsible and entirely irreproachable lives. At least there should be plenty of beds.