

conversations with Charles

The unknown motorist

Even allowing for the increased traffic it seems that obstruction caused by accidents is far greater than it was when I was young despite the roads being far better. Charles was clearly frustrated as we got stuck in a queue on the way to the golf course as the radio told us there was a serious accident several miles away. When he got out he noted that his ankle was somewhat puffy.

‘Coe, have you noticed how the priorities of the police seem to have changed over the years from getting the road open as soon as possible, to keeping it shut until the site is totally cleared and every measurement made?’

‘Perhaps they feel a greater need than previously to protect the scene to prevent further accidents or injury to those dealing with the problem. Where someone has died or been seriously injured, surely they must do their best to establish the cause, to satisfy the courts, the victims or their family, and to learn lessons from the event!’

‘But what about my deep vein thrombosis (DVT)?’ *he answered pointing to his ankle with a smile, adding, ‘But seriously, I can certainly think of instances that I have witnessed in the past where the attitude did appear to be somewhat cavalier in their approach. I also accept that the pressures on the police to come up with an answer have increased massively over the years and this may have contributed to the vast improvements in road safety since the 1930s, when there were three times as many deaths with a small fraction of the traffic.’*

‘Surely your very doubtful DVT pales into insignificance compared with that!’ *I replied.*

‘Indeed mine does, but it did not kill me on this occasion!’ *He said with a smile, ‘Nevertheless, I have been involved in horrendous traffic jams following accidents in the vicinity but not on my direct route. On one occasion the whole of north west London was severely congested and on another the country roads were at a standstill for miles around. The latter accident involved deaths through a vehicle being pushed off the carriageway into a tree. Despite the fact that there was virtually no obstruction to either carriageway the opposite one was closed for five hours and the other all day. I think you will agree that it is virtually certain these closures caused a serious medical problem in someone or perhaps in several people.’*

‘I must confess that something similar happened when my children were returning to London. Two separate trains were held for several hours while a suicide was being investigated. In one a person had severe asthma and another a heart attack.’

‘How trapped they must have felt, all for investigating the obvious that no one can survive when falling into the path of a train travelling at 125 mph!’ *Charles replied, continuing, ‘It is not only loss of life that has to be considered but loss of amenity!’*

‘But amenity must always take second place to hazarding life!’ *I replied.*

‘We will come back to that but let me give you an example. A friend of mine was on his way to his daughter’s engagement party when he missed it because his train was held for three hours because of a fire in a railway engine 25 miles down the line. The fire was put out quickly and diesel trains were allowed to pass on the slow line. He felt so incensed that he wrote to the chief fire officer who replied that he could not hazard his officers to the possibility of shocks from 25,000 volts. My friend’s reaction was that once the fire was out the firemen knew the hazard and would have no difficulty in avoiding the overhead line.’

‘Come off it Charles! Surely missing one’s daughter’s engagement party is nothing compared with hazarding the life of a fireman.’

‘Hazard there may have been, but the risk was virtually zero particularly as at that point there is a bridge which widely separates the slow and fast tracks,’ *replied Charles.*

Returning to the thrust of the discussion I asked ‘What is your solution Charles?’

‘Considerations of safety may have a higher priority than amenity but can never override it absolutely as the latter is what enriches life. I would ask the police whether the benefit to them in investigation, whether it be to satisfy those affected, to prepare for intended prosecution, or merely to cover their backs, always justifies the extent of the disruption to the lives of others that it causes.’

‘That would be very difficult to judge Charles!’

‘That is as may be, but recent disruption caused by prolonged closure of the only through route in a valley was thought by many to be. The police should ask themselves the question in every case.’

‘Perhaps easier said than done!’ *I replied.*

‘That’s no reason for not trying!’ *he said with conviction.*

‘Once we had an epidemic of DVTs when there were five or six simultaneous major roadworks on the A1, so I looked at the problem. Not only is there a risk of DVT, which of course is not confined to travel by air, but also the risk of coronaries is probably enhanced as well.’

‘Then there is the association between tender meat and stress-free travel to the abattoir!’ *he intervened.*

‘Yes, Charles, the Ovid searches produced the scientific evidence for this. I suppose it is not as irrelevant as it might seem, adrenal over-activity might compromise the outcome even if it were irrelevant to the incidence of coronaries!’

Charles smiled **‘An unforeseen benefit of having a tender heart!’**

‘Unfortunately no source, including a senior traffic police officer to whom I spoke, came up with any guidance as to the weight that should be attached to these risks, but the officer did assure me that the adverse consequences to other road users were taken into consideration when deciding on road closures, and recent advances in procedures had shortened their duration.’

‘Perhaps not enough!’ *Charles suggested,* **‘So I have a suggestion to make.’**

‘What’s that Charles?’

‘In as much as one of the reasons for closure is for the safety of the investigators, they should recognise the health hazard of traffic jams which may themselves cause death and serious morbidity, and so clear the road as expeditiously as possible. To remind them I would put a memorial to the unknown motorist in every traffic accident investigation room!’

As Charles would say this is yet another example of those directly concerned seeing the immediate benefit of their actions, but understandably not recognising the often remote transfer of risk and disproportionate loss of amenity. It might be said that current health and safety legislation and attitudes tend to ignore the latter, so perhaps Charles’ last suggestion is not as bizarre as it might seem.

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