MISCELLANEA

Health, Welfare, and Safety in New Zealand*

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I am frequently asked to give my impressions and views on health, welfare, and safety in New Zealand. There are severe limitations on generalizations of this kind; but during the last 10 years I have inspected over 1,000 different factories in New Zealand and other workplaces associated with mining, agriculture, timber felling, transport, and hydro-electric undertakings. From this experience certain general impressions have gradually crystallized.

Industry in New Zealand is in small units and conditions on the whole are good. The minimum requirements for health and safety at work, as laid down in the Factories Act, 1946 (based on the British Act of 1937), are usually observed, and a substantial proportion of firms go far beyond these requirements. There is general agreement in this prosperous country that good working conditions are part of the share-out from the golden wool and the flow of milk and meat. Most employers are in business in a small way and are close to their workers.

The workers themselves, like other groups in the country, want, first of all, good pay—cash is good medicine. They seem, however, to be characteristically difficult to push around and, though prepared to work under bad conditions for high pay, they set very definite limits on just how bad the conditions may be and on just how long they will work under such conditions. Over the years a growing pressure on the part of trade unions has developed, here as elsewhere, for more welfare facilities and better provision for health and safety at work; but always their main drive is for higher wages—a policy in line with trade union tradition to raise the standard of living and to provide security for union members.

It is hard to say which authority is most influential in shaping attitudes to welfare in New Zealand. There is a well-established system of arbitration and conciliation between management and labour, which must be a big

*Based on a paper read at the Duke of Edinburgh's Conference in 1956.

FIG. 1.—Old factories in Wellington, 1950.

influence, but little high-level intellectual discussion on theories of personnel management comes either from the employers or trade unions. The pressure to conform to the law derives very largely from the State, through the officers of the Labour Department. The State, through conferences, for example, seems to initiate policy and shape standards much more than in Great Britain. When the civil servant comes forward with definite proposals he is able to do so in an atmosphere softened up by prosperity. Plenty of productive conflict arises over changes in conditions but at the same time there is an abundance of the goodwill which is always more in evidence when the belt is not pulled tight. Recently a National Safety Association has been formed, independent of the State, but it is not yet an appreciable influence.

The development of welfare services anywhere owes something to simple goodwill, the sense of affinity between members of the same social group. In former times there was often innate in the relationship of employer to employee a sense of the responsibility felt by the parent to the child. Simple goodwill, however, is not enough. I remember the bitter chagrin of an employer who bought an expensive type of helmet and airline and told a man that he must wear it in order to protect his lungs from some harmful dust. Later he came back to find the apparatus smashed to bits, with no one

FIG. 2.—Corner of modern factory containing canteen, rest rooms, and swimming bath, rose garden beyond and large lawn to the main road.

able to throw any light on how the damage had occurred. His goodwill was altogether too simple.

In any case, it is naïve to push the pure goodwill story very far. A potent force which encourages employers to provide health and welfare services is enlightened self-interest. Health and welfare pay. All books on good management say so, and in consequence:

"... with to-day's competition for the most intelligent and efficient workers, stockholders cannot long afford directors who do not realize the importance of top health and safety conditions in their company's plants, nor managements which do not spend whatever money is necessary to give plant people the maximum of health and safety measures."—(GIBBON, 1947).

These sentiments, salted or ungarnished, can be heard in scores of speeches at conferences to-day, all over the world. Health and welfare thus become a technique for attracting and holding staff, much as the welfare state is a technique for keeping our whole society together. When labour is scarce welfare services also become an important item in competition between firms. In the later 1940s a firm in Auckland which employed mostly girls attracted much attention and some resentment by offering free hairdressing to female staff in working hours. Four hairdressers were included on the staff for this purpose.

There is often resentment towards pioneers of this kind from their peers; probably every move towards making working life more happy and comfortable has been widely resented by some section of the industrial community. "I'll have to give them all feather beds next!" exclaimed one employer, exasperated by what he called unfair competition. How far can welfare go? Certain American firms probably lead the field.

"Among the features offered at various business houses which I visited were background music, movies during the noon hour, a terrace for sunbathing, free tennis lessons, classes in interior decoration, personality development and horse-back riding, and social clubs that feature everything from bowling to dramatics."—(McCORMICK, 1954).

It is unlikely, however, that mere material benefit, be it a haircut or a motor-car, will ever compensate an adult personality for the sacrifice of his own will and self-respect. Integrated adults may deliberately choose to work in a small, ill-furnished, poorly equipped establishment rather than in a large, highly organized, efficient one for the very good reason that they like being "someone" in the smaller place.

The elaboration of welfare imposed from the top means more organization and discipline of the individual—the extra comfort may be a trivial feeling compared with the sense of resentment engendered by being organized by others. The negative reaction of the child to mother's "I'm only doing it for your good" is also encountered by managements who treat their workers like children. Moreover, there is a wider implication. It is all very well to demand adult responsibility and self-determination from citizens who elect their rulers, but if the control and detailed organization of all movement and behaviour during working hours is extended

to recreational activities, we are heading for social schizophrenia.

Motives easily become clouded; do we really want this or that, or do we just want the boss to pay out or the children to keep quiet? Should we sometimes adjust our attitude towards welfare services by a little less "freedom from" towards a little more "freedom to". One development I would like to see extended is to permit the use of factory premises and equipment on some cost-price basis for individual employees wishing to learn crafts out of working hours. More craftsmanship at the home level is one of the most creative potentialities of increased leisure. Certain industries, such as engineering, woodworking, and clothing, have an opportunity for permissive welfare here.

I would also like to see far more active and conscious appreciation of the importance of aesthetics. Stimulation from our senses strongly affects health and happiness, albeit we are largely unconscious of the stimuli. The reason we have survived at all biologically is that we have made the correct response to them. Are offices, factories, and workplaces to be made attractive? What value should we put on colour, gardens, design of buildings, and furnishings?

There is a feeling prevalent that industry should be shut away; it is unsightly alongside our dwelling-places. This aversion for everything pertaining to the workplace exists quite apart from the sound economics of zoning to facilitate service and supply routes, or the real need to shut away a noxious process. The attitude, surely, must be out of date. How much of it is due to unnecessary ugliness? There are factories in New Zealand—admittedly a land undeveloped architecturally—that are among the best buildings in the country and set in grounds that challenge the many beautiful gardens around private homes or in parks. Why can't we live close to them? Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this point. Talk to an average industrialist about aesthetics and he's likely to think you are crackers; talk to an average trade unionist and he's likely to think you are high-falutin. Modern industry should fill the gap left by the mediaeval Church as the patron of art as an alternative to ultra-violet lamps and hair-do's. If only a few more managers would lay out their own offices with a little taste and originality it would be something and I offer up a similar prayer for senior civil servants. What are we really working for? Surely not solely for more production, for more imports, for more production *ad infinitum*.

There is plenty of scope for group participation (rightly a key phrase in industrial circles today) in this matter of aesthetics. A firm employing large numbers in somewhat scattered units was approached by the girls in one group to know if they could have the materials to re-decorate their canteen. For their part they promised the labour. The proposal was agreed. The result so pleased the management that they paid decorators to do the same in other canteens. In two years most of these were in a parlous state of wear and tear, but the one that the girls had decorated still looked in very good condition. Group morale is a fascinating study. Some industrial units do not seem to understand it at all.

An organization, large by New Zealand standards, at which nearly 2,000 were employed, was much concerned because obscenities were scribbled and drawn on the walls of their expensive new toilet blocks—not an uncommon phenomenon in many countries. A consultation between management and union officials, shocked into unity, agreed that less privacy would be a sound prophylactic measure and all the doors of the W.C. cubicles were removed. I would swear that any member of any of their families would have told them they felt better with the doors on.

Union officials often seem to be as much out of touch with the feeling of the rank and file as management are; by the very nature of their personal experience and background they are not often familiar with psychological theories or social science terminology. The lack of close contact is greater in the bigger organizations. One trade union representative demanded and received agreement on the provision of showers. After they had been installed, he shared with the manager the sense of hurt and lack of understanding that followed because nobody used them. It was not surprising, and resembled the story of the epic struggles to persuade miners in South Wales to use pithead baths. Yet all miners now use them. Showers in those factories where workers become hot and dirty will come to be as commonplace as baths in homes. Before long it will seem inconsiderate not to give any man the opportunity to go home feeling presentable and as clean as he arrived at work.

What is culture but this development and expression of feeling? The function of any art is to stimulate our frontier of feeling to grow a little. To be effective the response engendered must link with experience and not be so intolerable as to threaten our integration, but the stimulus need not of necessity be merely pleasant and beautiful. However, it is essential to realize that the senses may grow tired or may be strained by too much stimulation or too much repression, just as muscles can be flabby or fatigued and torn. Satisfaction and tolerance can pass to boredom and unrest, which may progress to disgust and violent reaction.

The delights or the tensions and explosions that originate from the senses operate at work as in the home or anywhere else. While man is capable of considerable control and of the exercise of reason, his feelings cannot be disturbed too much or too long without basic instinctive reactions coming into play. Much more understanding is required of the importance of this factor in shaping occupational health. The effects of noise and lighting and colour at the workplace provide relatively simple examples of how physical health may be affected through the senses. Excessive noise may go further and become a clear physical danger to hearing.

I have pondered much on safety. Some of the confusion about safety policies lies in a failure to recognize a certain positive value in danger—safe for limb may be dangerous for mind and children should be allowed to climb trees and cross dangerous roads, thereby learning to deal with dangerous situations; but it is callous and irresponsible to let them pick up things they could not know were very hot, or fall into holes they have not yet learned about.

Every working group from a family to an army seems to have an accident rate. Possibly the best way to germinate an attitude conditioned to accident prevention is to sit around and talk with the people concerned. Group participation—no dogmatism—no censoriousness. But many times I have been asked, "For goodness sake, don't go about and put ideas into their heads", when I have wanted to discuss hazards with the men concerned.

It is possible to draw a line between danger which is emotionally stimulating on the one hand and plain foolhardiness on the other. Sir Arnold Toynbee has said that civilization owes much to the former and that safety first on every occasion could be socially disastrous. Safety first is out of date as a slogan, in any case.

Powerful resistances against taking care lie deep within us. I meet them in myself and in my own sons and they seemed to me to be particularly evident among New Zealand men. They have a maddening phrase "she's right" which is constantly used to denote a sense that things are not really quite right, but that they will do. (In Oxfordshire when a hay wagon was fully loaded, the pitcher used to shout to the man on top: "her'll do". He meant just what he said.) The firm may provide goggles and guards, helmets, and local exhaust ventilation, but the workers will not always use them.

The trade union representative complains as strongly as does the foreman, the works manager, and the managing director, but how do these higher paid men themselves behave? Suggest to any one of them that he smokes less for health, that he diets more wisely, that he does not drive his car so fast, that he plays safe. Does he do it? In our society, professional men, business men, skilled workmen and unskilled all seek more money or prestige before better health; they seek emotional satisfaction before safe practices. Perhaps this attitude is more socially healthy than at first appears. Social health is certainly not always synonymous with individual health; nor is being secure the same as feeling secure. Do the group and the individual clash again here?

It is uncertain who is to be the disciplinarian in safety matters. Authoritarianism is out of date; it is inefficient, for it fails to use the potential of collaboration. Leadership remains a modern requirement. I have seen managers over and over again tolerate stupid, illegal, and dangerous practices knowing them to be so but seemingly at a loss to say or do anything; and I have seen trade union officials behave likewise, and inspectors, and have done so myself.

I have heard a works doctor say, "It's not my business to see that the men wear goggles; that's management." Many a manager I have heard say, "I can provide them, but I can't make them wear them." No participation again. In some circumstances a severe discipline is possible, but the threat of dismissal, like the threat of being shot in the army, has limited application. The limit is very quickly reached in New Zealand and a walk-out results. It seems that every now and again one side or the other must stick its toes in and have a showdown and some strife occasionally is no justification for gloom and despondency. Both management and labour are in need of specialist advice, from medical men and also, I

think, from social scientists on what contributes to prejudice, on the source of unconscious direction, be it from tradition, peer groups, or elsewhere, and on likely chain reactions from particular measures.

Possibly there will gradually be a movement towards industrial democracy, using the term as defined in the pamphlet issued by the Progressive League (1956). Democracy is a confusing word recognized as desirable in state affairs but highly suspect still in industry, private and nationalized. Some interesting experiments far in advance of co-partnership, profit sharing, joint consultation, and similar arrangements, are now going on in Great Britain, France, Italy, and West Germany.

I want to see people more capable of being responsible for their own health and safety. Seeking opportunities and perfecting techniques for teaching should occupy doctors in industry far more than routine examinations and clinical medicine.

Occupation can and ought to be extremely health-making, mentally and physically. It is noteworthy that occupational therapy first started in mental hospitals. Already, in the big and successful industrial concerns, physical dangers are to a great extent guarded, fumes and dusts trapped and sucked away, good hygiene and amenity standards assured. The position is very complex, for more production is socially healthy, when achieved without dangerous tensions.

Medicine should move further towards affecting our way of life, our social organizations and institutions, even though at present medical training does not encourage an understanding of social disciplines. The doctor is taught primarily to be technically adept at diagnosis and treatment of the individual and that is how he is mainly used in industry as elsewhere. The accent on clinical medicine within the factory should not become too strong, especially when it duplicates an outside service. In my opinion, the doctor should be drawn more into shaping the working way of life, with an educative rather than a directive function. Some clinical service, of course, is necessary, varying largely with the type of work and geographical situation. Apart from the time factor, and some doctors rarely have time to go round their factory, the industrial doctor should beware of the assault on the individual which is entailed by compulsory examinations and treatments. There is a far greater danger in the offing than that of missing some significant symptom—

The whole earth is our hospital
Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
Wherein, if we do well, we shall
Die of the absolute parental care,
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.
(T. S. ELIOT, *East Coker*.)

Here and there in my own confusion there are spots of light. Health, welfare, and safety appear an indivisible trinity within a broad conception of health that is very much undervalued. This is as evident in the senior executive who would rather be a success than avoid an ulcer, as in the labourer who would rather have dirt or danger money than adopt a self-discipline of clean and safe practices. The same attitude exists in doctors and other professional men.

Within the industrial framework there are undoubtedly factions antagonistic to one another—not just two factions—which find themselves at loggerheads in this field as elsewhere. Techniques for understanding these differences need to be developed by social science studies, statistical analyses, feed-back techniques, and so on.

Leadership calls for consideration of the point of view of the led. If compromises are reached which appear silly to a professional man—one that always irritates me is the acceptance of milk as a universal prophylactic—it does not greatly matter. He, too, must often appear silly. Any compromise which is arrived at by genuine collaboration does much to hold the group together. We must be sensitive both to the pressure for change, and to the necessity for stability. We have to keep moving, for nothing is concluded:

. . . so there's to be
No climax and adorable close
With ego agonistes crowned and smiling ?
The strange charm of being alive breaks off
Abruptly, with nothing determined, nothing solved,
No absolute anything

How nature loves the incomplete. She knows
If she drew a conclusion it would finish her.
But, oh God, for one round Amen.

(CHRISTOPHER FRY, *Venus Observed*, Act 2, Sc. 2.)

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