GUEST EDITORIAL

Reprint of “An introduction to the Journal”

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This article is a reprint of a previously published article. For citation purposes, please use the original publication details; J Safety Res, 1(1), pp. 2–4.
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An Introduction to the Journal

Norvin C. Kiefer

The publication of the first issue of The Journal of Safety Research is an occasion for celebration, and an event that should have deep historic significance for the nation's future safety programs.

Accidental death and injuries constitute perhaps the most important of all menaces to the lives, health and well-being of Americans. Accidents rank below only heart disease, stroke and cancer as a leading cause of death at all ages. But in spite of the fact that these three general categories of disease claim numerous victims among young people, they characteristically attack people at and beyond middle age. Accidents, on the other hand, are by far the greatest killers of children, teen-agers and young adults — the age-groups in which the greatest numbers of years of future, useful life is lost forever by each untimely death, or the longest potential future period of partial, even total disability is incurred.

Hundreds of millions of dollars, the abilities of a huge number of research workers, and the facilities of many universities and other institutions are devoted, in steadily increasing numbers, to research in the causes, prevention and treatment of diseases. By contrast, expenditures in money, research time and facilities, used for research basic to prevention of accidents or to reduction of severity of injuries have been disgracefully small with relationship to the demonstrated rank of accidents and their sequels among the major threats to the nation's citizens and their economy.

In the past few years there has been evidence of a change in this situation, and the amount of accident prevention research has increased. It still is far from adequate; and its expansion has been uneven, with emphasis on some areas but neglect of other, equally important ones. Nevertheless, the available signs are encouraging.

Throughout history, most knowledge has developed through subjective observation and empirical impressions, perpetuated by tradition long past the time when subsequent study has proved it to be untenable. Twenty-five centuries ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said:

“To know that you do not know is the best.
To pretend to know when you do not know is a disease.”

In such a context, perhaps this pretense also is the oldest and most ubiquitous of diseases.

It is reasonable to suppose that throughout man's existence on earth, he has had at least some vague realization of his most obvious, major sources of death or mutilation by accidental means. Even in the twentieth century, however, accidental injuries have been and still are regarded with an astounding amount of fatalism, augmented by the feeling on the part of most people that accidents are either “acts of God” or events that happen to “other people” out of stupidity, bad luck or other factors existing in or visited upon only those “other people.” In the English language, the very word “accident” implies an event that occurs by chance or bad fortune, rather than one that probably was preventable and that occurred because of some degree of human negligence or ignorance.

Unlike the rather obscure causes of in-

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fections, metabolic or degeneration
diseases, the mechanisms of accident-pro-
duced disasters usually seem to any
observer to be visible and tangible. He
draws his own immutable conclusions as
to both how and why an accident occurred,
regardless of how superficial or incorrect
his surmise may be. Everyone thus is a
potential, self-styled and vocal expert on
accident causation.

Small wonder that safety programs in-
clude so many activities that are based on
post priori conclusions, that so frequently
provide arenas of bitter conflict among
disciples of diverse tenets that are as tena-
ciously clung to as they are uninformed;
and that accidents continue unabated. And
small wonder that time-honored principles
are being blown apart by research workers
who believe what they can prove by ac-
curate statistics or in the laboratory, not
what has been offered to them out of
seemingly inviolable tradition.

Careful, objective research will not, by
itself, prevent accidents or diminish acci-
dental deaths and injuries; but to attain
these worthy, in fact essential, objectives
demands that services and action projects
not be empirically formulated but have a
solid technological basis and subsequent
critical appraisals of results. There is noth-
ing new or revolutionary in this statement:
this is an era of fantastic technological de-
developments in which any attempt at pro-
gress rightfully is expected to be based
on exhaustive technical investigation and
testing.

Increased financial support of safety re-
search cannot be, alone, sufficient to assure
continuation and acceleration of research
endeavors. The dedicated services of able,
outstanding research workers cannot be
obtained without such support but they
cannot be purchased with just money,
either, particularly when the competition
for such scientific talent is so furious.

Full personal satisfaction and scientific
recognition and prestige are among the
most important requisites to enthusiastic
and persistent labors of a researcher. Most
of the time, investigative work is tedious,
often to the point of drudgery. Frequently
the climax of months or years of hard work
on a single project is the utter frustration
that comes from realization that the inves-
tigator has been trapped in a blind alley
and that either a new and radically dif-
ferent approach must be used or the project
be abandoned.

When something of significance has been
established, confirmed or disproved, how-
ever, understandably the investigator
wants to talk about it to as wide an audi-
cence as he can obtain. What use is new
knowledge if it is destined to wither in
lonely confinement to the consciousness of
its discoverer and perhaps a few of his
friends and associates? The research worker
needs to have a means of communication
that assures him both of extensive trans-
mittal of his conclusions and of the prestige
among his fellow workers that he rightly
should accrue. Even more important, how-
ever, is the need to make his findings and
conclusions available to other investigators,
as well as to those who may be able to
adopt such new knowledge to productive
use in the form of revisions or shifts in
direction of on-going safety activities, or
of initiation of new services.

One of the difficulties in carrying out
such communication has been the reluct-
tance of many professional and technical
journals to accept safety research manu-
scripts for publication. Frequently, these
papers do not fit the journal’s editorial
policy, and also they may strain the evalu-
ating ability of the members of its editorial
board who may have limited knowledge
of what, to them, is an unfamiliar and ex-
traneous field. The problem is greatly exag-
gerated by the fact that safety research is
multidisciplinary in nature, often involving
in one project, for example, several bi-
omedical and engineering specialties, each
of which is of an unusual type within even
the usual range of biomedical and engi-
neering specialized competence.

There is ample evidence that important
observations from highly technical safety
research have gone unnoticed or, more
often, have been long delayed in dissemi-
nation, because of a series of rejections for
publication in reputable journals with ex-
tensive readership. In turn, this has been most discouraging to the research worker himself and has served to postpone, for long periods, improvements in safety programs that could have been made much sooner had the research work and its results been made available promptly.

The National Safety Council publishes a large number of excellent periodicals and pamphlets on various major phases of safety. These items are produced, however, for the general public or for skilled safety workers who, in spite of their trained and effective actions, seldom have profound scientific backgrounds. Their requirement is chiefly for information of direct and immediate practical usefulness. These various journals, needed as they are, thus are neither prestigious outlets for scientific researchers nor inviting reading material for their research colleagues.

The idea of a separate, multidisciplinary technical journal devoted to original articles, as well as to abstracts, describing true research in safety, was conceived about two years ago. It was favorably considered by the Research Committee and the Medical and Health Committee of the National Safety Council; and subsequently was proposed for Council sponsorship in the belief that successful publication of such a journal could become a major contribution to the growth of safety research and, therefore, of the entire nation-wide safety movement. Approval by the National Safety Council was obtained and the proposed new journal now is a reality.

Those of us who initiated this project first had to go through a soul-searching process to answer for ourselves the paramount question: will there be enough technically sound, acceptable and useful papers to assure viability of such a journal? The answer, we were convinced, was "Yes!" Our enthusiasm was deliberately tempered, however, by cautious decision to begin with a quarterly publication. As the number of investigators increases and the fruit of their work becomes available, however, *The Journal of Safety Research* will become bimonthly and perhaps even monthly.

There is tangible evidence that this prediction is not overly optimistic. For the sake of the future saving of many hundreds of thousands of American lives, and of many more millions of expected future years of the lives of our young people, safety research of all types must be enormously expanded. It must take its place among that conducted in other conditions that cause most of our deaths and disability. This new journal should become a significant measure of the success of such efforts.