The dangers of sledging

J R Silver

Snow sports are popular: between 600 000 and 1 million people take skiing holidays each year, and the number of accidents resulting from skiing and sledging has increased. I set out to find how sledging accidents resulting in admissions to this spinal injuries centre occurred.

Method and results

Since 1944 there have been 8500 admissions, half of which were traumatic. These have all been recorded on computer, enabling incidents related to snow to be identified. Of 16 such accidents, 10 were due to skiing and six to sledging.

In all cases the level, the place, and the date of injury were obtained. In addition, for sledging accidents the following information was obtained, either by postal questionnaire or direct questioning: circumstances of the accident (organisation of trip or activity; amount of instruction; location or contributory conditions); fitness and experience (general level of fitness; level of experience of activity or other winter sports); alcohol and drugs (amounts taken, if any). The table summarises the results. An attempt was made to determine the exposure to risk by analysing the time spent in the activity relative to the accident.

Comment

The increase in the number of accidents related to snow has been disproportionate. Between 1951 and 1968 there were 588 traumatic admissions; 71 were due to sport, and there was only one injury from a snow related accident. Between 1984 and 1988 there were 343 traumatic admissions, of which 60 were due to sport, six of them being snow related.¹ Five of the six patients were on holiday abroad, and the other was injured tobogganning in England. Most accidents occurred when the participants struck an obstruction

such as a pylon or a tree in unfamiliar circumstances.

All the injuries were thoracic lumbar, which is in contrast to the 10 skiing accidents, in which four of the injuries were cervical, and gymnastic, rugby, and trampolining injuries, in which most of the injuries were cervical. This is because the participants were lying down on sledges or toboggans and flung off at high speed, striking their backs, whereas in the other types of injury the participants led with their heads.

The incidence of these sledging accidents, when considered per year, is small, but the ratio to skiing accidents—0.6:1—is high. When account is taken of the accidents in per unit of time it is extremely high. Five of the six accidents occurred on holiday abroad. These sledgers only spent half an hour out of a fortnight's holiday sledging, whereas much of the rest of the time they were skiing.

The equipment used was unorthodox and included a plastic sheet and a rubber ring towed by a vehicle. Several of the participants had no experience at all of sledging and were injured first time out.

Sledging took place in a social atmosphere and drink was consumed. It was done at night when it was dark and the slopes were icy and not patrolled. The ends of ski runs were used; there the tracks come together and are frozen and potted; they are below the snow line so there would be other obstructions to collide with. In this light hearted, holiday atmosphere, sometimes protective mattresses were detached from trees or pylons and half a dozen holidaymakers piled on in an uncontrolled manner.

Hedges and Greenberg reported 61 sledging accidents during a three week period. One patient had multiple trauma, five had head injuries, and one had a lumbar fracture.² Kline and Lusk reported three sledging accidents; one participant had a spinal injury.³ Sloan *et al*⁴ reported 101 sledging accidents in eight days, resulting in one fatal head injury and five spinal injuries.

Details of sledging accidents

Case No	Age at time of accident	Date	Level of injury	Activity; circumstances	Organisation; instruction	Location; conditions	Fitness; experience	Alcohol and drugs
1	16	1958	L1/2	On a toboggan towed by car in USA; car lost control	None	Not known	Fit	?
2	30	1975	T8&T12	Ski holiday in Austria (tour)	Tour company; none	Designated ski run	Fit; no experience; one previous skiing holiday	No alcohol; contraceptive pill
3	19	1987	T11/12	Sliding down mountain on piece of plastic; barman in Switzerland	Informal with friends; none	Nursery slope; night	Fit; no experience; general winter sports experience	2 or 3 Beers; no medication
4	16	1988	T7	Holiday with friends (tour); sledging in Italy; hit a tree	Informal with friends	Evening under floodlights	Fit	None
5	25	1990	T10	Tobogganing with one friend in England	None	Private land; rough ground	Fit; no experience	None
6	43	1991	T6/7	Holiday in Switzerland (tour)	Hired from ski school; no instruction	Nursery slopes; equipment spun out of control	Fit; no experience	None

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Makeshift sledges after social occasions can lead to an unhappy end to a holiday

Sledging can be compared with another high risk activity, motorcycle riding. The 1268 inpatients admitted over one year included 280 motorcycle drivers, among whom there were seven spinal injuries but no cases of paraplegia.⁵

When high speeds are achieved sledging is intrinsically dangerous. Even when compared with motor cycling it produces a disproportionately high number of cases of spinal injuries. Holidaymakers should be wary of participating in a social evening of sledging while on holiday.

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- 2 Hodges JR, Greenberg MI. Sledging injuries. *Ann Emerg Med* 1980;9:131-3.
- 3 Kline DG, Lusk MD. Management of athletic brachial plexus injuries. In: Schneider RC, Kennedy JC, Plant MR, eds. *Sports injuries: mechanisms, prevention, and treatment*. Baltimore, Williams and Wilkins, 1985.
- 4 Sloan JP, Maheson M, Dove AF. How dangerous is sledging? *BMJ* 1985;290:821.
- 5 Gissane W, Bull J, Roberts B. Sequelae of road injuries: a review of one year's admissions to an accident hospital. *Injury* 1970;1:195-203.

A commission of lunacy, mad doctors, and happy hunting

DBEC Gill

History delighting to confuse us, the term "lunacy commission" has two quite different meanings. Lunacy commissioners were in many respects the forerunners of today's Mental Health Act commissioners. Appointed under various Georgian and Victorian acts of parliament, they had as their brief, among other things, to oversee institutions in which lunatics were kept to ensure that both public asylums and private madhouses treated their charges properly according to the regimes laid down by parliament, and to check that no patient was being inappropriately detained. If they found any such, they had powers of release.

Much less has been written about the other quite separate matter covered by the term commission of lunacy—namely, the legal proceedings taken against a person to relieve him of the conduct of his affairs or his liberty, or both, on the grounds of mental unfitness. The rough equivalent today would be an application to the court of protection. The novel *Handley Cross* by Robert Smith Surtees, published in 1854, contains a vivid account of such a legal case. It presents a complete contrast with present day procedures, being nothing short of a civil lawsuit fought along adversarial lines.

To understand the novel and this episode in it, it is necessary to know a little about the author. Although a London lawyer by training, Surtees was a countryman by birth. He was a member of the squirearchy and a foxhunter from childhood. His books reflect a tension between town and country. With the rise of a prosperous Victorian middle class and later "mushroom aristocracy," many newly wealthy people retired to the country. There they adopted attitudes to rural life and sports perceived by established locals such as Surtees to be entirely wrong headed.

The hero of *Handley Cross* is John Jorrock, Esquire, Surtees's greatest creation and one of the great comic characters of English literature. Master of Foxhounds, the sporting wholesale grocer from the old City of London, he was created at least partly to satyrise these rural "yuppies" who went hunting in order to display their wealth and social status rather than, like Jorrock

and Surtees, because of their devotion to the sport for its own sake. Jorrock was the very opposite of anything to be classed as smart. He was "not a gentleman" he was fat, not really able to ride, and ludicrously uncouth in social manners. But all Jorrock's faults are forgiven, in Surtees's eyes, because of his down to earth, warmhearted character and his wholehearted passion for the chase.

Handley Cross is a long novel of 80 chapters, most of them about Mr Jorrock's various adventures as master of the Handley Cross hounds. This position makes him one of the leading citizens of Handley Cross Spa, and much of the fun throughout the book comes from the outrages he perpetrates on the finer sensibilities of the more genteel and sanctimonious inhabitants. Jorrock here personifies Surtees's own attitudes as a full blooded Regency man, delighting to lampoon the emerging priggishness and stifling respectability of Victorian times. Surtees realised his plan to create a character who would show up the changing scene of foxhunting, but then, like all good fictional inventions, Jorrock took on a life of his own, with fantastic adventures of all kinds, including the one of present interest—his brush with the lunacy laws.

The lunacy commission

Trouble begins for our hero when Captain Doleful, the mealy mouthed master of the ceremonies at Handley Cross, buys a horse from Jorrock, which he overworks, half starves, and generally mistreats. The horse falls sick and dies. Doleful sues Jorrock for the return of the purchase money, and loses. A lawsuit between the two principal inhabitants of a major resort causes quite a stir.

The report of the action . . . having done good service to the London papers during the dullness of autumnal news. . . Mr Jorrock's conduct and career had been greatly canvassed by cautious citizens, amongst others by his next of kin, and we may briefly state that our worthy friend's jollities or eccentricities at length earned for him a commission of lunacy.

Jorrock's family believe that the expense of hunting is

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