

Howard Talks Tech

Do You or Your Acquaintances Suffer from Scotosis?

Do you think that most accidents are caused by *carelessness*? Are some people, “*Accident Prone*”? Do you adhere to the H.W. Heinrich’s principle he called the “*Domino Theory of Accident Causation*”? Why do I ask these questions? Sometimes, we in the safety profession find it very uncomfortable to change our mind. We have become accustomed to spouting the same old phrases and are quite good at preaching to others. However, sometimes a pioneer challenges us to look beyond our paradigm and think new thoughts. But; just as often we reject the new idea and cling ferociously to our old ways even to the point of deciding not to see the new idea. Did you know there is a word for this malady?

I recently came across the term “**Scotosis**”, which refers to a kind of *cultivated collective blind spot* that we develop to ward off knowledge that might upset our customary way of viewing the world. Do you still push for “*Accident Reports*”? The term *accident* in popular parlance is an event beyond the control of individuals so they avoid accountability. Leaders in our field asked years ago to switch to the more neutral term “*Incident*”. Incidents are caused, and the causes can be identified and may be corrected.

In an NSC online poll in August 2011, readers were asked to apply their experience to Heinrich’s theories and decide for themselves on their validity. The results were intriguing: 5% said they were absolutely false, 29% said they were completely true; surprisingly 10% were ignorant of Heinrich. The largest percentage of respondents, 57% felt that his thoughts were somewhat valid. Probably, I think because they never subjected them to critical thought.

Michael Taubitz, founder of Lean Journey LLC called Heinrich’s views a “constraint” on safety professionals who are trying to attack high-severity, low-probability incidents. Canada-based quality management consultant Wayne Parady said some consultants practice what he termed “parrot-based safety” – they repeat unproven numbers based on Heinrich’s work to promote their own solutions.

In *Principles of Accident Prevention*, Heinrich placed an inordinate emphasis on the unsafe acts of individuals as causal factors and gave insufficient attention to causal factors deriving from operating systems. In refuting Heinrich’s work, Fred A. Manuele, in his 2002 book, “[Heinrich Revisited: Truisms or Myths](#)” he singled out the 88-10-2 ratio of accident causation as having the most influence and causing the most harm to the safety profession. It is Manuele’s belief that many safety practitioners would not agree with Heinrich’s premise that “man failure is the heart of the problem and the methods of control must be directed toward man failure.” Manuele says “man failure” conflicts with the work of others, such as W. Edwards Deming, whose research finds root causes to derive from shortcomings in the ***Management Systems***.

In conclusion: There is a cure for Scotosis. It is personal research. I believe we need to open our minds to new thoughts, study the literature, ask questions, discuss theories and test the hypothesis in the real world. Only then can we avoid the intellectual illness of Scotosis and make a valid judgment.