



South Cumbria &
North Lancashire Branch

Joint meeting 21st March 2019



South Cumbria Occupational
Health & Safety Group

Topic: *Consequences of a fall from height*

Speaker: Jason Anker MBE, Director, *Anker & Marsh*

Venue: The Netherwood Hotel, Grange-over-Sands, Cumbria LA11 6ET

Jim Tongue, Chairman, *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch*, welcomed members to the Branch's joint March meeting with *SCO HSG*. He then introduced our motivational speaker, Jason Anker MBE, who experienced a life-changing fall from a ladder in 1993.

Jason introduced his presentation by explaining that he had adopted a different approach to his presentations because he had recently put his accident into perspective.

He therefore started his presentation by featuring a series of video clips and images of well-known celebrities and asked members to decide who were the real winners and losers. For instance, he compared the lives of the British ski jumper *Eddie the Eagle* and the Finnish ski jumper Matti Nykänen. Both made world headlines. *Eddie the Eagle* captured imaginations when in 1988, through guts and determination, he became the first British ski jumper to enter the Olympic ski jumping category since 1928. He came last but, in spite this and of other set-backs went on to become a sports commentator and to set up a successful business. He still holds the British ski jumping record. Whereas Matti Nykänen, who is widely considered to be the greatest ski jumper of all-time (due to the number of Olympic gold medals that he won), coped badly with his fame. He became reliant on alcohol and developed a reputation for violent behaviour. He died aged 55. Jason asked members to consider who was the 'winner' and who was the 'loser'.

Jason then used to his own life experiences to show that it is often the way that we cope with our problems that has the biggest effect on our lives, our mental wellbeing and our ability to develop effective coping mechanisms.

He then described his accident. He was 24 years' old and he worked as a labourer for a small business owned by his father-in-law. They were working on a relatively simple, but urgent roofing project. Access to the flat roof was via a ladder that was not tied on or anchored at the foot. Jason thought that the job was finished but he was called back up onto the roof to make a final check. His ladder anchor-man also thought that Jason had finished using the ladder so that he was not in position. Jason started climbing the ladder. The ladder fell; Jason fell with it. He thought that he was OK but then realised that he could not move his legs. He was taken to hospital.

After an initial X-ray and assessment Jason and his wife were told that that he would probably make a full recovery. A later scan showed that there was more serious damage. Jason was then told that he would never walk again and that he would not regain control of his bladder or his bowel. This was a devastating prognosis for him, his family (wife and two young children) and the small business that he had worked for. He spent several months in hospital followed by months in a rehabilitation unit. He then had to cope with the break-up of his marriage, a lengthy fight for compensation and a life-style that was spiralling out of control.

Jason explained that it had taken him many years to realise that he had been through a series of emotions and coping strategies since his accident. These included disbelief at the extent of his injuries, realisation that he would be wheel chair bound for the rest of his life, blaming others, bitterness, coping mechanisms with 'crutches' (alcohol and drugs), coming to terms with his disability, beginning to focus on the things that he could do, talking about the

consequences of his accident to others, acceptance that he shared some responsibility for what had happened to him and finally what he called 'rebound' when he was able to start rebuilding a meaningful new life.

He said that it was many years after his accident before he could accept that he shared some responsibility for what had happened. He began to accept that he was 'not in a good place' on the day of his accident. He had been drinking heavily the night before, His relationship with his wife was under stress and he did not enjoy his work.

Yes, his employer should have had better ladder safety procedures in place, but he had previously worked for a firm with high work at height safety standards; he knew that the ladder should have been properly anchored before he used it. This led to some discussion about shared responsibility and how difficult it could be for young employees to query what they were being asked to do, especially if their employer was also a relative.

Jason went on to explain the impact that his accident had had on his life. He spent months in hospital where he was regularly visited by his wife, but, when he came out of hospital, she left him. His friends tried to help him, but their solution was to take him to the pub. Alcohol became his solace during the years when he struggled to get compensation, to keep in contact with his children and to build a life for himself. He admits that he was consumed with bitterness and that he became dependent on alcohol and later drugs to help him cope.

He gradually began to build more meaningful relationships with his family, especially his son and daughter. In 2009 he met someone who suggested that he could help prevent others from suffering similar avoidable accidents by telling them about his accident. He started to do this and began to see that maybe he could make a difference. This helped him make a determined effort to combat his alcohol and drug dependency. He began to focus on the things that he could do rather than the things that he could not do.

At first his presentations were tinged with bitterness and he liked to shock his audiences with the gruesome details of his disability. Audiences listened. His story made an impact. Directors, managers, workers, safety professionals and apprentices all responded to the raw emotion of his story and the physical and psychological impact that it had had on his life and the lives of his family. They left his presentation with a raised awareness of the need for basic safety precautions that helped to prevent avoidable accidents. He discovered that he really could make a difference and hopefully prevent future avoidable accidents.

Jason explained that It was a few years after he started making presentations that he was finally able to accept responsibility for his accident. He said that he now focusses the importance of mental wellbeing in the workplace as a key message that he wants his listeners to understand. That he now understands that a lack of wellbeing can lead to avoidable workplace accidents. That he was not 'in a good place' on the day of his accident. That work colleagues need to help one another by recognising when others are stressed - by getting them to talk about their problems rather than by taking them out to the pub to 'drown' their sorrows.

Jason said that he was encouraged by the recent Mental First Aiders' workplace initiatives, but that he felt that this was just the beginning. When asked what the next step was, he said that he could not answer that question but that he believed that it was important for employers and employees to work together to find the right answer.

He explained that for him part of his healing process had been small life-style changes that had made a big difference. Things such as a healthy diet, short meditation sessions to help him sleep better and focussing on the things that he can do rather than the things that he cannot do. He was proud to have been awarded an MBE in 2016 for his work and proud that he had 'walked' his daughter down the aisle at her marriage ceremony. He left members with the observation that for most people a happy workplace would make them more content than continually striving to earn as much money as possible.

Jason's presentation made an impact on our members and generated some thoughtful discussion. Jim Tongue, Chairman, *South Cumbria & North Lancashire IOSH Branch*,

thanked Jason for his motivational presentation and presented him with a small token of the group's appreciation. Jim then asked committee member Dave Clinton to say a few words because it was through Dave's friendship with Jason that the group had been privileged to hear Jason speak.

Dave explained that he had first met Jason when he was invited to speak to workers at *Centrica*. He said that Jason's first presentation had had a major impact on the employees' who heard him speak. It changed their attitude to safety. They suddenly understood why they needed to follow basic safety procedures. *Centrica's* senior management therefore agreed that it was important to invite Jason to talk other groups of employees. They even arranged for him to speak to men working on the off-shore oil rigs in Morecambe Bay because of the impact that his presentations had on employees' attitude to safety procedures put in place to prevent avoidable accidents. Dave said that Jason really had made a difference at *Centrica* but, as workforce personnel changed, it was important to ensure that this initial impact was not diluted.

Attendees then had an opportunity to network with one another and Jason over tea or coffee and biscuits.

There was a committee meeting after the main meeting.

You can contact Jason via: info@ankerandmarsh.co.uk

See also: <https://ankerandmarsh.co.uk/>

Video clip of Jason: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UroWBAL2NB8>

Related *HSE* web site links:

Using ladders safely: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/work-at-height/using-ladders-safely.htm>

Safe use of ladders: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg455.htm>