HASLAM'S VIEW



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There's nowt as queer as folks on holiday

AREN'T PEOPLE FASCINATING? THE BIZARRE AND INTRIGUING WAYS IN WHICH PEOPLE look at life, at health, or at risk never fail to astonish me. But, as the old cliché goes, if we were all the same then life would be seriously boring.

I've just got back from holiday, and the warm blue sea was exactly what I needed at this stage of the year. Holidays have always been important to me, but I am constantly astonished and intrigued by the way that sane, normal people behave on holiday in a way that assumes that all the risks that face them at home don't exist.

Take a simple example. Crash helmets for motorcyclists save lives. Since their use in the UK was made compulsory, you now never ever see a motorcyclist without a helmet. Until you go on holiday, that is. Then it becomes rare to see a British tourist wearing a helmet. Because the law doesn't insist on it, holidaymakers hiring motorbikes and mopeds celebrate their freedom by taking a risk that they would never ever take at home.

Where is the logic in that? What possible mental trick allows people to say to themselves – I'm on holiday, so despite the fact that I don't know the roads, or the driving conditions, and I'm on a different side of the road, nevertheless because I'm on holiday I needn't wear a helmet?

And the same goes for smoking. At the hotel where I was staying, there were several Brits who smoked much of the time – and they absolutely agreed that they never smoked at home, but – hey! – they were on holiday, so it's different. Away from the nagging doctors, the health warnings, and the ban on smoking in public buildings, they light up and puff away as if the health risks had gone up in smoke too.

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I'm absolutely not a killjoy. Of course we all go on holiday to escape the daily grind. I went whole days without looking at my BlackBerry, and if ever behaviour was addictive and habit forming it is electronic communication, so I feel proud of myself. But I still remain mystified at how many people simply don't believe that risks exist once they've left home for their holiday.

But then, understanding health beliefs is a constant mystery anyway. In my first day back in the practice, I was consulted by a middle-aged woman with pain between the metatarsal heads of the second and third toes of her right foot. She seemed more than a little anxious about this, and I could see that my reassurance really was going nowhere. When I know I'm not winning, I always go back to first principles and explore the individual's ideas, concerns, and expectations. Almost without exception, I have found that if the consultation is not going well, it is because I haven't found out one aspect of their ICE.

And so I delved. And it turned out that she was terrified she was about to have a heart attack. Because of this pain in her foot. Most odd.

I delved further – expecting the answer to have been a reflexologist who had prognosticated on her health from the state of her feet.

It was far simpler than that. She had read that heart disease could sometimes be associated with pain in the limbs; she knew her leg was a limb, and her foot was part of her leg. Therefore, in her mind foot pain could be linked to heart disease. Once this concern was unravelled, reassurance suddenly became both possible and easy.

As I said – aren't people fascinating?

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