

Would I Rather FIGHT BULLS?

Greg Peterson, ASHI Member



A matador only has to worry about one thing: Staying away from the horns.

Some inspectors face an endless list of possible dangers, many of which are unpredictable, and some of which are capable of doing us in years later with no warning. Sometimes I think fighting bulls would be less dangerous than inspecting homes.

While hazardous occupation could be a synonym for both bullfighting and home inspecting, bullfighters probably are more conscious of the dangers they face than are most home inspectors. If we gave thought to the hazards of inspecting homes, there would likely be a rise in home inspection rates.

The perils are many

Once, while inspecting an old home that had recently been renovated, I found myself feeling my way around a very dark crawlspace. Because the vents were sealed, there was little light. I moved my flashlight around just in time to illuminate dozens of old, rusty, double-edged razor blades before sinking my hand into them. Of course, they had been used and had come from an old medicine

cabinet equipped with the slot in the back for disposing of used blades. (Those of you who are younger than 30 years old may have no idea why a medicine cabinet would be so designed, or for that matter what a double-edged razor blade is.)

I've also faced steep, slippery roof tops; dark, wet, spider/mold/rat/snake/hornet/skunk/dog-infested crawlspaces and outbuildings; electrical hazards of all kinds; angry landowners; rotted and unsafe sub-flooring and stairways; unknown toxins and pesticide treatments; unsanitary, exposed sewer products (liquid and gas); flammable gases; lightning; poison ivy—more perils than I can remember.

The worst of it is that most of these conditions are unrelated. They cross many occupational specialties and involve a variety of types of threats. In most professions, the dangers are better defined and easier to pin down. An electrician, for example, constantly confronts electrical hazards, but seldom is faced with flammable gas issues, pesticides, mold, etc. Because electricians deal with the issues involved in electrical safety as part of their job, dangers are well known and expected; the electrician is prepared and can develop the habit of instinctively performing the necessary checks with the proper equipment, using tried and tested techniques. Additionally, the elec-

trician likely has personal protective gear and safety equipment.

The home inspector, on the other hand, is a generalist. Home inspectors typically are not extensively trained in one field, and usually do not possess the depth of knowledge that specialists rely upon to keep them safe. Also, the inspector's tool bag will be less complete than that of the specialist.

Of course, we generally do not get as involved with any particular system as would the specialist who is performing troubleshooting or repairs, but even so, inspectors are frequently intimate with potential danger. For example, how often is unsafe wiring present behind old fuse panel covers or in basements of old buildings? I have been

shocked while examining the underfloor area when my forearm contacted energized BX sheathing lying on the crawl-space floor.

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All too often, safety in home inspecting is overlooked during training and throughout our careers. This may be because the subject is too broad, but a condensed course designed solely for our industry would be worthwhile.

In the meantime, simple common sense will go a long way. Is safety worth spending time and money? Consider the cost of spending a few months in the hospital, or worse, becoming incapacitated and unable to continue inspecting simply because safety was a low priority.

Because I would like to continue to inspect homes for a long time and I don't like pain, I've studied this problem. Making a list of what to do and not to do would require identifying thousands

of items, things such as wearing slip-resistant shoes, not placing an extension ladder too close to the supporting structure, or avoiding walking on a roof directly above the service mast. If a list won't work, what will? ▶▶▶

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The following five suggestions are meant to encourage innovative thinking that will lead to greater awareness and, in turn, to safer inspections. The intent is to establish an inspection philosophy that incorporates safety awareness as a binding element. By incorporating a safety program into your inspection business, individual safety actions will come more naturally.

1. Use simple reminders to increase awareness. If

you don't work for a company with a program, safety is easily forgotten. Use simple reminders to increase your safety consciousness. Put a "Be Safe" decal on your vehicle or your ladder. Create an automatically generated weekly e-mail to yourself that simply states, "Don't forget to be safe." Simple reminders help keep safe work practices in your sights.

2. Designate one day a month as safety awareness day. It works for large companies, why not for you? On the 1st,

"Don't be cheap with safety."

15th or 30th of every month, make it a point to identify one way that you can work safer. For example, search "electrical safety" on the Internet, or check catalogues to learn more about voltage sniffers, respirators or other tools that might help lower the hazards of inspecting.

3. Don't be cheap with safety. After you've researched safety-related equipment on your designated day, be willing to spend some money. You don't have to purchase everything at once, but consider the following basic items:

- Overalls for the crawlspace to protect you from contaminated soil and help deter poisonous insects. They can be purchased for under \$4 and will hold up through a number of inspections.

- Full-face respirator for the crawlspace and attic to prevent breathing contaminated particles and getting bacteria-laden dust in your eyes, making life in the crawlspace bearable.
- Voltage tester to identify energized components that otherwise seem safe.
- First aid kit; include specific medication you require personally, such as an allergy kit if recommended by your doctor.
- Fire extinguisher in the truck, readily accessible and inspected monthly.
- Good ladder.
- Cell phone, kept close at hand, can be the most important safety equipment you own.
- Self-drying, anti-bacterial hand cleaner to use a couple of times during the inspection, especially in older, unkempt homes.
- Animal deterrent spray. Twice, I have been caught away from my car by large, snarling dogs, and neither time did I have my pepper spray, but wished I had.

4. Avoid the action-hero syndrome. We all had this when we were teenagers, but it's time to think like an adult. Everyone is susceptible to not only the obvious dangers, but also to the hidden and subtle problems. Do some research and learn about the things that can hurt you, then revise the way you work. For example, the dust that becomes stirred up in the crawlspace while you are moving around under the house is teeming with nasty things.

This air may be the worst stuff that's been in your lungs since you gave up no-filter Camels. Often, just before the inspection is scheduled, the seller hires a termite company to spray. Termiticides are some of the worst poisons in use and can be harmful if inhaled.

Crawlspace dust often contains fungi and mold spores, particles from rat feces, bacteria, sometimes asbestos, and always the unknown. A section of my town is known to have high levels of PCBs in the soil. The dust is not only bad to breathe, but often is an eye irritant. The dust in attics also can be



unhealthy, and a respirator is recommended there as well.

4. Take first aid and technical courses

- Take a first aid course or refresher that covers things that could come up during a home inspection, especially common hazards for your area. It may be a good idea to learn about heat exhaustion, or the native poisonous snakes, spiders, and other insects, as well as toxic plants. If you're able to identify snakes and spiders, you'll be able to describe the one that bit you to your doctor. Should an accident occur during your home inspection where CPR or basic first aid is required, you'll know how to respond.
- Increase your technical knowledge about the various systems of the home, especially the electrical system, to increase your ability to work safely. When you study a piece of equipment or a system, include the hazards of inspecting it.

Simply put...

Spending money, time and effort will improve any aspect of your business. The payoff for spending time and money on safety is the accident, the injury or the loss that you don't have.

It's difficult to measure what doesn't happen, but years of good health can be counted as a benefit. Safe work habits are paramount in every business and trade. Unfortunately, the hazards home inspectors face often are obscure and unpredictable. For the matador, the bull's horns are all too evident, and an awareness and respect for this danger is implicit. It's our responsibility to develop the same awareness and respect for the not-so-evident "horns" we face—to help ourselves and others work safely. ■

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