

for a protracted period in a number of countries. One example is a strike in Israël, as a result of which the *British Medical Journal* reported that it may have been good for the population.³ Similar stories exist in relation to doctors' strikes in Canada, the USA, Colombia and other countries. The death rate appears to have dropped during each strike and to have risen again when the doctors went back to work.

There has been some research done that could point to reasons for the drop in deaths. Also, there have been articles in major medical journals pointing out the large number of people in certain countries who die as a result of medical interventions in hospitals; in one study in the USA, deaths from negative effects of prescription drugs amounted to over four deaths per ten thousand of the population in one year.⁴ Per head of population, the figures are similar in Australia and the UK

Is anyone thinking beyond these raw figures? Is anyone wondering why this is happening? Does anyone ask why we accept these deaths? Is anyone thinking about this information – really thinking?

We can immediately see that this death rate is far greater than the death rate associated with the use of motor vehicles (around three per fifty thousand each year in Victoria). Governments and communities are doing a lot of work to reduce the latter, but I am not aware of much being done to reduce the former. What does it take to have people say “enough!”?

With the doctors' strikes, what caused the drop in death rate? There have been some suggestions. An obvious suggestion is that, with doctors on strike, there were no deaths due to iatrogenic (doctor-caused) reasons. Another, very interesting suggestion (in relation to a doctors' strike in California) was that people who were ill or old could not die (in their own minds) if there were no doctors around.

What I find most interesting is that, while suggestions such as those above were made, no-one seems to have asked such questions as: “what does this teach us?” and “can we learn anything from this that will allow people to live healthier, longer lives?”

While there is so much going on in the world that presents such a rich opportunity to ask questions, there is a widespread failure to make use of these opportunities.

There is also a worrying drop in the amount of pure research being done. Pure research is about asking questions such as, “what will happen if I do ...?”, and then repeating the question over and over as the researcher follows an unknown path. Increasingly, research is done with a set of preconceptions and to obtain a particular, defined result. We seem to have forgotten that so much of what has been discovered in the past was achieved by people who observed something and asked ‘why?’ or ‘why not?’ One example is the discovery of penicillin; another is the discovery that a bacterium can be the cause of stomach ulcers.

Thinking and asking questions allows you to respond to what is going on around you in a way that could make a difference. If you respond to situations without thinking, you do so through your emotions and your prejudices. While emotional responses are valid, they are not productive on their own and will generally not bring about useful action. It is the people who think, and especially those who think outside what is expected, who foment change. For individuals, societies, institutions and businesses to survive and thrive, they need to embrace change, and thinking makes this possible.

Thinking for yourself allows you to be a more active participant in society. It allows you to live creatively and to teach your children a way of surviving the sometimes stultifying environment of school. Thinking allows you to make sense of what goes on around you, locally and in the wider world. It helps you make better choices and should lead you to enjoy a more fulfilling life.

1. *New Scientist*, 2336; 30/3/2002, p.12
2. <http://www.darwinawards.com>
3. *British Medical Journal* 2000;320:1561 (10 June) and at <http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/320/7249/1561?ck=nck>
4. Starfield, B. (2000, July 26). “Is US health really the best in the world?” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 284(4), 483-485.