

**special feature...special feature...special feature...special feature...special feature...**

**AP75**

**August 1999**

## **HAZARD ALERT - HOT AIR BALLOONS**

Hot air balloons are part of the summer landscape, increasingly used as competition prizes, birthday gifts and special holiday treats.

But accident victims have joined with the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) to warn that ballooning is not as innocuous as it looks and should be undertaken with caution.

“Many people may not realise that hot air ballooning is a hazardous activity,” said APIL officer David Marshall. “At the end of the day, people are taking to the air in a wicker basket at the mercy of the elements and have only their pilot to rely on for their safety.

“While many people do complete their trips without problem, there have also been some extremely serious injuries. It is important that passengers are aware of the dangers and know the right questions to ask before setting out. At least they can then provide themselves with as much protection as possible.”

Between 1990 and 1998, more than half a million people took part in recreational hot air balloon rides. During that time there were 40 accidents, resulting in 86 injuries (33 classed as serious) and one death.\*

mf

**AP75/2**

Other incidents - such as hitting overhead power lines, sudden descents, crashing into trees, landing on a railway track and infringement of air space - were also reported, demonstrating clear potential for further injuries.

Sue McDonald, from Cheshire, was seriously hurt when the balloon in which she was travelling hit the ground, bounced back into the air and hit the ground again hard and she says this caused a fractured vertebra and damage to her bladder. "I don't want anybody to go through what I've been through," she said. "It's too late for me, but I really want people to know that ballooning is not as safe as it appears.

"My lifestyle has completely changed since the accident - I can't walk very far, I can't sit or stand for very long and I have to be near a loo all the time. But I'm lucky - it could so easily have been worse. It's really important that people treat balloon flights like any other kind of flight and if you don't know anything about the operator, find out more about him."

An investigation into the accident revealed that the pilot - who had also been involved in an accident four months previously, in which 12 people were injured - had miscalculated the fuel requirements needed in the prevailing weather conditions, and that the hard landing was due to fuel exhaustion.

A day after Sue's accident, 75-year-old grandmother Audrey Jones died and eight other people suffered serious injuries when a hot air balloon hit power-lines and burst into flames, in what was described by the coroner as 'an avoidable accident'.

mf

### **AP75/3**

Julie Pullen, the solicitor acting for a woman who was paralysed in the incident, said this had been the first time the pilot had flown the balloon involved in the accident with a full passenger load on a morning trip.

"The accident was the result of a catalogue of errors," she said. "Different weather conditions, the number and weight of the passengers, the size of the balloon, the route of the balloon - even the time of day - can all affect how a balloon should be handled.

“When taking part in a balloon trip, it is very important to check the specific flying experience of the pilot in the particular conditions governing the trip.

“People should also check that the operator’s insurance cover is appropriate, so there is at least proper compensation available for injured people if things do go wrong,” she went on. “And passengers should always ask for proper safety instructions.

I also believe passenger safety could be improved with a co-pilot flying on each trip, and by using equipment made of non-conductive materials, which would make the result of impact with power lines less severe. At the very least, hot air ballooning should be advertised as a hazardous activity, so people know what they’re getting into.”

mf

#### **AP75/4**

Her feelings were echoed by Selby MP John Grogan, who became particularly concerned about the hazards of power lines after one of his constituents was injured in the same fatal accident.

“This is a high risk activity which is often given as a special gift which the recipient feels obliged to accept,” he said. “Most people will accept and go along without thinking about the dangers.”

- ends -

Note to editors: \* Figures provided by The British Balloon and Airship Club.

For further information, please contact:  
Lorraine Gwinnutt  
Press & Communications Officer

APIL

33 Pilcher Gate

Nottingham

NG1 1QE

Tel: 0115 958 0585

Fax: 0115 958 0885

e-mail: [lorraine@apil.com](mailto:lorraine@apil.com)