

ASK THE ADVISER

2) PROTECTION: - The second in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

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"One summer's day, a year or so back, I decided it was time for a Mountain Bike ride and suggested to one of my heirs that he might wish to join me. Being 19 years old at the time he, rather impolitely I thought, made reference to our respective ages and to the age and condition of our bikes. Somewhat put out, I advised him that whilst, like it's owner, my cycle was perhaps not exactly in the first flush of youth, it had the great benefit of having been hand-built in Scotland and it was therefore the best.

This issue having been dealt with we headed off and had a few miles on tarmac followed by a great blast through the trees, but suddenly, for some unknown reason, I noted that said offspring seemed to be pulling ahead. This would of course not do so, when we reached a very steep uphill section with lots of exposed tree roots and stones, I decided to stand on the pedals to gain more speed. All bikers know what comes next.

As I lay in a battered and bruised heap with the bike on top of me assessing which parts were permanently damaged (mine, not the bike's), and wondering how long it would be before Dean realised he was minus one ancestor, a couple of things occurred to me — firstly, cycle helmets are a very good idea, and secondly, as I had come to a halt a very short distance from a steep drop onto rocks, I thought "Goodness me, that was close" (or words to that effect).

All of which brings me neatly to the point of today's ramblings — the need to protect ourselves from life's dangers, risks and vicissitudes and the ways in which Caithness CAB can help. All of us face risks every day and we do our best to minimise these — we make sure that our children are safely strapped into the car, we look both ways when crossing the road and we make sure the house is secured at night. Unfortunately, there are some risks which are beyond our control and these often affect our health, employment and income. So what can we do?

Firstly, we should all have life assurance — at least enough to cover major commitments such as a mortgage and to provide for our families if the worst

happens. We also need to look carefully at what would happen if we could not work due to a major illness or accident and the first thing to do is to find out how long our employer would continue to pay wages, if at all, and at what rate. This depends on the terms of the contract and gives us a starting point. We can consider Accident and Illness Insurance, Critical Illness cover, Mortgage Payment Protection Insurance and, if we can afford it, Permanent Health Insurance. It is also a very good idea to try and build up an emergency fund — enough to pay the bills for as long as possible if income reduces drastically. This is never easy, but it really is worth it.

Whilst we cannot give Regulated Financial Advice at Caithness CAB, we can provide lots of unbiased information via the Money Advice Service, we can give an explanation of the various types of insurance available, we can help with budgeting advice and we can signpost to properly authorised advisers who can assist in obtaining suitable cover. Also make sure that Buildings and Contents and Car Insurance is in place at all times — always shop around as there are huge variations in cost and insurers do love the "inertia factor". If you get an excessive premium demand from your existing provider have a chat with them. You will be amazed at how much cheaper it will get.

So that covers the basics, but we also need to protect ourselves against numerous other potential problems — making sure that if we buy goods and services online we have high-grade security on our PC; remembering never to click on links from unknown sources: being very cautious indeed if we get unsolicited phone or doorstep sales calls and never ever giving out personal data to unknown third parties. At the moment there are a lot of very dodgy calls being made offering to "unlock" pensions or similar and can I please stress that you should never take advice of this type from a cold caller. Always consult a trusted and authorised Adviser or come to CAB and make sure you have all the information you need before making any decision whatsoever.

On a happier note it is approaching holiday time and as well as getting the sun oil and bucket and spade out, we need to have quality travel insurance in place. Whilst holding a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) is important, this only provides basic cover in EEA countries and does not replace the need for cover. Check out the market carefully as there are huge variations in cost and always declare any pre-existing health conditions — this is vital as Insurance firms have a nasty habit of refusing claims on the basis that full disclosure was not made. On this note, if you have any problems at all with any insurance claim, come to CAB where we can help you fight your case as far as the Ombudsman if needed. Also we can help by contacting your bank or credit card provider where a purchase has gone wrong and you have paid with a credit or debit card.

So there we are — we can help with all your protection needs but would always advise great caution if, like me, you sometimes forget that the laws of physics always apply to mountain bikers.