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**BOOK REVIEWS**

**The Limits of Safety: Organisations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons<sup>3</sup>**

by  
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MANY MAY WONDER why a book on US military nuclear weapon safety has relevance to a health journal. The book's first, chapter sets the scene with a generic discussion of accidents and organisational learning. This discussion is viewed from two opposing theories, High-Reliability Organisation theory and Normal Accident theory.

In this day of quality assurance programs, such information has relevance to health care professionals who work in large organisations. Hopefully one would not identify health care as a hazardous technology but aspirations to emulate their focus on reliability are probably worthwhile.

High-Reliability Organisation theorists believe that serious accidents can be prevented through the design of organisations and their operation, citing US aircraft carrier operations as proof. Normal Accident theory claims accidents in high-risk industries, although rare, are an inevitable and normal part of hazard us technology management. As one reads these two opposing views, the parallels with our health care system become obvious.

Rather than a simple 'bash' of all things nuclear or a cynical recounting of nuclear near mishaps, Sagan then 'competitively tests' these two theories against the US response to the Cuban missile crisis, the subsequent NORAD early warning organisation and the Thule B52 bomber accident. Later events such as the 1973 DEF- CON 3 alert are used as benchmarks of learning (or the lack of it) from earlier nuclear weapon handling errors. By carefully choosing some of the more bizarre or notable events of American nuclear weapon history the book succeeds in making a fairly dry topic quite interesting. This was a worthwhile book to read.

So... if you have to know how a grizzly bear nearly caused an American nuclear strike on Cuba please read on.

1. Reviewed by Andy Robertson
2. Harris R. Paxman. *A higher form of Killing*. Paladin Press: 1982. ISBN 0586083979.
3. This book was reviewed by Fabian Purcell, MB BS FANZCA, Staff Anaesthetist – Southern Health Care Network in Aust *Mil Med* 1999; 8(2):23.
4. Sagan SO. *The Limits of Safety: Organisations Accidents and Nuclear Weapons*. Princeton Studies in International History and Politics Princeton: Princeton University Press; 1993: ISBN 0-691-03221-1.