

Inflated OPINION

In the light of recent new legislation concerning personal flotation devices, John Leech voices his concerns about automatically inflated lifejackets

The recent legislation, *SI 259 of 2004 Merchant Shipping (pleasure craft) (lifejackets and operation) (safety) Regulations, 2004*, brought in by Minister for the Marine, Dermot Aherne TD, has no doubt grabbed the attention of many.

About thirty years ago, navys around the world commenced wearing automatically inflating lifejackets. They were called hazardous duty lifejackets. These duties were, by their nature, hazardous. There was a real risk of somebody entering the water in an unconscious state, and previous history in these duties dictated that wearing automatically inflating lifejackets was a requirement. I have been sailing virtually all my life, and I don't believe that sailing or cruising are 'hazardous duties'!

There are a number of concerns that I have with these types of personal flotation devices (PFDs):

- These lifejackets require a regular maintenance programme to ensure that they will operate correctly when needed. This is costly, and requires time to take it to the supplier and collect it again when completed. Not all of us will remember to have these maintained. The following guidelines should be adhered to each time you wear these PFD's:
 - ensure the CO2 cartridge has not been partially or wholly unscrewed from its housing,
 - ensure all buckles, fasteners, crotch strap and webbing straps are functioning correctly, and in good order,
 - check that their lights, if fitted are operating correctly,
 - ensure the lifejacket is adjusted for your body size,
 - check that the automatic inflating device has not been triggered accidentally and has not been damaged, and
 - always wear it over your oilskins or other protective clothing.



- There have been a number of drownings as a result of loose or unseated CO2 cartridges, faulty or damaged automatic trigger mechanisms, a leak in the lung, faulty non-return valves the manual deflator left in the manual inflating orifice, incorrectly fitted lifejackets (straps too loose), and no crotch strap fitted.
- These lifejackets appear to have become a form of fashion statement for some waterways users, and I believe that some are wearing them in inappropriate situations. They are not all being correctly maintained and worn, as people have not received adequate training in their operation.
- For cruiser, dinghies, windsurfers, kite surfers, canoeists and jet skis our inland waterways, buoyancy aids are normally adequate. There is no hard-set rule for the wearing of PFDs, as we are all different sizes, have different levels of swimming ability.

A 50 Newton buoyancy aid is adequate for most situations on the average swimmer. The major manufacturers of PFD's have a large range of buoyancy aids and lifejackets, with a variety of flotation, from 40 to 100 Newton's.

There are also oilskins with jackets, or air-inflated lifejackets built in to them. More recently there are hip jackets (popular with sailors for many years), with a buoyancy device built in, and which are very comfortable.

I very often read and hear people making comparisons of wearing PFD's with wearing seat belts, this is a very bad comparison to make for the following reasons:

- seat belts conform to one standard and have one function,
- seat belts require virtually no maintenance, and
- PFD's have more than one function, and come in many shapes, sizes and models, depending on factors such as the environment they will be used in, the size and weight of the wearer, the swimming ability of the wearer, the type of craft, whether it is night or day, the type of work being completed, ease of use etc.

If you wear an automatically inflated lifejacket, or a manually inflated CO2 lifejacket then please ensure you carry out the regular checks on it and have it serviced by an authorised agent every year. ■

John Leech is the chief executive of Irish Water Safety.

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