

Technical comment

Mark Bowler

The modern fish hook is a dangerous implement. Consisting of high-tensile, carbon-steel wire, which is heat-forged and hardened for strength and durability, the sharp bit (the point) is further sharpened by chemical etching after machining. However, for the impaled, the most problematic part of a hook is the reversed nick in the wire (the barb), which is designed to anchor and hold the hook once the point has penetrated. For the angler, unhooking a fish is a split-second, two-stage job – press down on the hook’s shank to release the nicked barb and then ease the hook backwards to free it. For the doctor, however, unhooking an angler is a different, er, kettle of fish. Human tissue is softer and more yielding than a fish’s mouth, and with hooking comes the added problem of an inflammatory reaction with swelling. Two of the three methods of removal involve pliers: either snip off the eye of the hook with pliers and feed the remainder of the hook-wire


through the tissue, or push the point and barb right through the tissue, snip off the point behind the barb and ease the wire out of the wound.

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Alternatively, a quicker and easier way is to use a piece of strong thread, loop it around the bend of the hook, press downwards on the top of the shank (to release the barb), ask the patient to brace himself, and tug sharply and confidently backwards on the thread. This process works best if the angler is freshly hooked, before swelling occurs. Ironically, monofilament fishing nylon makes an ideal thread for this operation, but, like any good angler, check the breaking strain before coupling it with the hook.

Doctors will be pleased to know that barbless hooks are slowly gaining popularity amongst the angling fraternity, but until anglers start wearing suits of armour, hooks in flesh will always be a regular sight in accident and emergency.

Mark Bowler is editor of the award-winning magazine Fly Fishing & Fly Tying, and one-time (1967-1970!) angling companion of the editor of the Morecambe Bay Medical Journal.