

Date Received

THE DAILY HAZARD

D.I.Y. CAN KILL

One day last year 'John Riley', a tenant on the Kingshold Estate in Hackney, went to see his GP with a chesty cold. There was something going on in John's chest which the doctor couldn't explain, and he referred John to the London Chest Hospital. The consultant John saw happened to specialise in asbestos related diseases, and diagnosed thickening of John's lungs arising from work with asbestos. John would have to be examined regularly for signs of cancer for the rest of his life. But John was sure he had never worked with asbestos. The damage was inexplicable.

A few months later something dropped through John's letter box: it was a warning from Hackney Council to the Kingshold tenants not to redecorate their flats or drill walls for fixtures because of the risk of asbestos exposure. John has

lived on the estate for many years and has redecorated several times. The link seemed clear, and the Chest Hospital recommended that John should be urgently rehoused - a recommendation which has still not been carried out by the council.

John's illness, though a personal calamity, was the spark that the Kingshold tenants needed for a fight against their dangerous housing conditions. 'They took the asbestos out of the Town Hall,' said Marion Cullen, co-ordinator of the tenants' asbestos action group, 'but they didn't even tell us about the asbestos in our homes.' Independent reports commissioned by the tenants have shown high background readings of fibres in homes and significant contamination during DIY work.

The action group has discovered that although a GLC survey listed asbestos on the estate in 1984, most tenants were unaware of its presence. Like many council tenants, they have redecorated their asbestos boxes every few years. They have stripped walls, sanded, drilled and removed asbestos panels. As John Riley says, 'Do the council expect us to live in a tip?'. Council building and maintenance workers have likewise been exposed. 'We were working on the estate for several months before we knew the stuff was there,' said a former Hackney carpenter. The implications of the Kingshold events go far beyond Hackney. They call into question both the ability of councils to 'manage' asbestos, and the official line on the risks posed by asbestos in housing.

Theory and reality

Asbestos on London estates like Kingshold is supposed to be 'managed', because removal, it is argued, is too expensive. 'Asbestos management programmes' require that all the asbestos in every building is located and listed; tenants are told where it is and what to do; any maintenance or building

work is checked for asbestos risk and is controlled by a permit-to-work system; the condition of the asbestos is checked every six months; and potential buyers are informed. All fine in theory, but it breaks down in the real world of London's housing. Kensington and Chelsea runs just such a system. A central database lists all asbestos in council buildings, and there is a public register. But tenants' organisers on the borough's Lancaster West Estate told a Hazards Centre worker that many tenants didn't know about asbestos on their estate. And control of the estate's chronic cockroach infestation has been hampered for five years because the pest control contractors fear asbestos exposure.



Kingshold Estate tenants meet to discuss the progress of their campaign to get rid of asbestos on their estate.

There are many reasons why asbestos management fails. Tenant populations change. Information may be badly presented or incomprehensible. In emergencies such as burst pipes, asbestos procedures get overlooked. Fibre releases from children's play, fire, vandalism or break in are beyond the council's control. Kingshold tenants argue that maintaining asbestos rather than removing the asbestos has failed on their estate, and that they are the guinea pigs if not the victims of an unworkable system.

About the time that 'John Riley' was diagnosed, the United States magazine *Science* published an article denying that 'low level exposure to asbestos is

a health hazard in buildings and schools'. The authors, three from the States, one French, and one British, are in senior positions in the medical establishment. They argued that most asbestos in buildings is 'white' (chrysotile) asbestos, and tried to show that this type does not cause cancer at 'low' doses. They concluded that asbestos removal put the removal workers at risk more than it protected occupants. Worker education, maintenance and management were the answers.

The world of these scientists is far removed from London's estates, where successful management is a practical impossibility. They blithely assume that 'asbestos in buildings does not spontaneously shed fibres': the Hazards Centre showed five years ago that London's estates shed fibres when doors are banged, tower blocks shake in the wind, or even when tenants use a washing machine. Heating systems riddled with asbestos blow fibres everywhere. The truth is that no-one really knows the hazard posed by asbestos in buildings because there has been no serious work done to find out. It was sheer chance that John Riley's lung damage came to light: how many other tenants also have his condition?

The Kingshold tenants have stepped in where the medical establishment has failed. They have organised themselves to place their exposure on record with their doctors and the council. They know that if they do not record the history of non workplace exposure no-one else will. In the battle against medical complacency they are in the front line.

Asbestos: scientific developments and implications for public policy. Mossman and others. *Science*, 19 Jan 1990.

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HEAT STRESS



During the very hot weather London enjoyed (or suffered) in July and August the London Hazards Centre had many calls from workers in different industries about working in a hot environment. The question most often asked was, "Is there a maximum working temperature?"

The answer is no, but the World Health Organisation recommends 75.2°F (24°C) as a maximum level for comfort, and the GMB union suggests 18°C-24°C. A bit less than the 80's and 90's recorded in the hot spell.

One call came from a TGWU Safety Rep in a North London bus depot who had recorded temperatures of 110°F in the air of a bus driver's cab, rising to 120°F near the cab floor. Several bus drivers had booked out sick suffering from the effects of heat stress. Others had taken to wearing shorts in an attempt to keep cool in the driver's seat. London Transport management promptly told them to put their uniforms back on, and a dispute ensued.

Heat stress arises from loss of water and salt: apart from making people ill, it impairs their judgement and heightens the risk of accidents. Not only drivers but also their passengers were being put at risk.

With the aid of a full-time TGWU officer, LT management were finally persuaded to consult their medical advisor, who confirmed what the Centre had said. Management had no choice but to agree to put notices on heat stress up in all depots at once and to allow all workers who become unwell to stop work and book off sick, recording this in the accident book.

The housing offices of Islington Council didn't reach 110°F - the thermometer was showing a mere 90° when some 50 staff finally lost patience with management's prevarications and walked out of four different offices around the borough. "Our manager's attitude was 'I don't care if you all drop dead of heat exhaustion as long as the office is staffed'," said a NALGO shop steward at one of the neighbourhood offices. Her line manager had refused to allow a single worker from the housing team to leave early to avoid suffering the rush hour heat on tubes and

buses: an attitude which led to the whole team of eight workers leaving straight away.

At another of Islington's neighbourhood offices, a person with epilepsy who left half an hour early was threatened with disciplinary action. The union reps had been trying for three weeks to get reasonable provision made for the heat in a building which, from their account, amounts to an unventilated greenhouse. Later that day seven more staff walked out. And at the Central Housing Office in Essex Road, 24 staff left en masse.

Islington NALGO is now in negotiations on a maximum working temperature, and the dispute has led to a new determination not to put up with hazards. 'People are very angry about a whole number of things - the heat was the final straw,' said the Durham Road steward Rob Murthwaite.

BUG BUSTING

Summer holidays are over, the kids are back at school - and for many parents and teachers the struggle against head lice begins again. It can take months to bring a serious outbreak under control. But before you despairingly douse your kids' heads in chemicals, take a good look at the ingredients.

Amazingly, it's still possible to get shampoos containing lindane off the chemist's shelf. This should be avoided, as should carbaryl and permethrin. Malathion

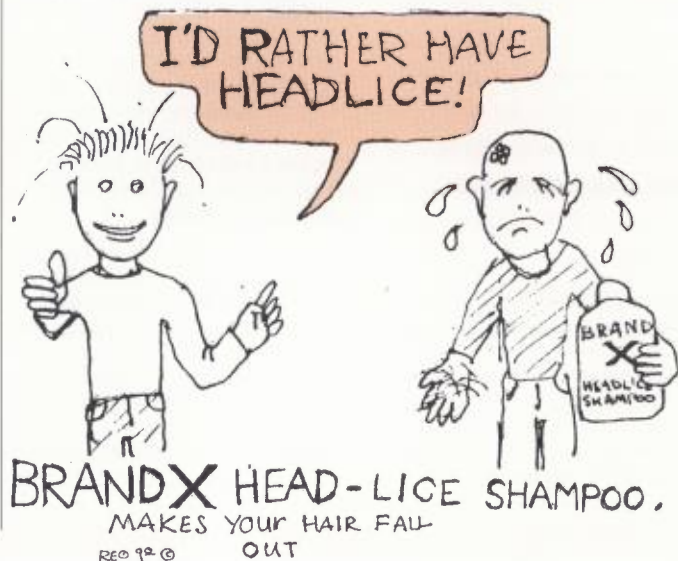
is considered to be less toxic to humans and doesn't get through the skin so easily, but should still be treated with respect. A newer insecticide, phenothrin, is available in a shampoo called "Full Marks". Phenothrin has by far the lowest toxicity to laboratory animals, but it hasn't been around long enough to convince everyone that it's effective, or for its long term effects to become clear.

No chemical can be claimed to be 100 per cent non-toxic, so minimum exposure is best. Moreover, insects frequently subjected to a particular insecticide can develop a resistance to it, so that you can end up leaving insecticides on the head for twelve hours instead of two. You can minimise children's exposure as well as insect resistance by taking a systematic approach.

Community Hygiene Concern (CHC), a West London based community group, offers a systematic, co-ordinated eradication programme. "Our aim is to completely eradicate the head louse population," said a helpline worker. "We could do this overnight by co-ordinating the community desire to be rid of lice, organised through schools."

CHC organise "bug busting" days, aiming to treat all live cases in a group at once, thus stopping re-infestation. They work with schools, community centres and the media to gear up for the bust. "The children came out of school waving their detector combs and chanting 'bug busters'," said our contact. The group also produces regular newsletters and operates a helpline.

CHC: 32 Crane Avenue, Isleworth, Middlesex TW7 7JL; tel 081 341 7167



'switch off first!'

ELECTRICITY AT WORK REGULATIONS

In 1987/88 there were 20 deaths and 309 officially notified major injuries caused by electricity at work. These injuries and deaths resulted from shock, burn, fire, explosion and arcing. In addition, there were an unknown number of incidents such as falls, caused by lesser shocks which might not themselves produce permanent damage.

One reason for these deaths and injuries was the patchiness of the legal protection for those working with electricity. Dating back as far as 1908, the old regulations ignored 16 million workers in agriculture and service industries, and allowed 'live' maintenance work at up to 650 volts.

On 1st April 1990 this changed, when the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989 came into force. They place new duties on employers (and also on employees) to provide safe electrical working practices.

The Regulations tell employers to assess activities which use or are affected by electricity. This includes the suitability, design, construction, siting and installation of systems and the evaluation of adverse effects, including environmental effects. All electrical equipment is covered by the Regulations from battery operated tools through VDUs and photocopyers up to power lines.

The Regulations offer safety representatives opportunities to raise standards of electrical safety and to ensure training for people engaged in electrical work. But there may be difficulties in enforcing the Regulations. For alleged breaches of many Regulations, it is defence for someone to prove he took all reasonable steps and exercised due diligence. In many other instances, employers will only need to show that they took "reasonably practicable" steps to comply with the regulations. Given the interpretation of reasonable behaviour for employers often taken by the courts, these provisions dilute the impact of the Regulations.

The main requirements of the Regulations are as follows:-

Regulation 4 (systems, work activities and protective equipment): all systems shall be constructed and maintained to avoid danger as far as reasonably practicable; every work activity shall be carried out so as not to give rise to danger as far as reasonably practicable; protective equipment shall be suitable, properly maintained and properly used.

Regulation 5 (strength and capability of electrical equipment): no electrical equipment can be used where its strength and capability may be exceeded so as to give rise to danger - this applies to unusual and transient as well as normal conditions.

Regulation 6 (adverse or hazardous environments): the construction and protection of equipment

must prevent danger arising from mechanical damage, effects of the weather, natural hazards, temperature and pressure, wet, dirty, dusty or corrosive conditions and flammable or explosive substances.

Regulation 7 (insulation, protection and placing of conductors): all conductors shall be covered with insulating material or have such precaution taken (including being properly placed) so as to avoid danger.

Regulation 8 (earthing or other suitable precautions): precautions shall be taken to enable discharge to earth from any conductor in, or in the electrostatic or electromagnetic fields created by, a system. In addition to earthing, other techniques such as double insulation, connection to a common voltage reference point, equipotential bonding, use of safe voltages, non-conducting environments, current/energy limitation and separated or isolated systems may be used as circumstances permit.

Regulation 9 (integrity of referenced conductors): nothing that might break the electrical continuity or introduce high impedance shall be placed in a circuit conductor connected to earth unless suitable precautions are taken to avoid danger.

Regulation 10 (connections): all joints and connections in a system shall be mechanically and electrically suitable for use, including connections to terminals, plugs, sockets and joints between conductors.

Regulation 11 (means for protecting from excess of current): efficient, suitably located means shall prevent an excess of current in every part of a system, taking into account overloads, short circuits and earth faults.

Regulation 12 (means for cutting off the supply and for isolation): suitable means shall be available to cut off the electricity supply to equipment and to isolate any equipment.

Regulation 13 (precautions for work on equipment made dead): precautions shall be taken to prevent equipment which has been made dead while work is being carried out on or near from becoming charged during that work.

Regulation 14 (work on or near live conductors): work on or near live conductors is permitted **only if:**
1 it is unreasonable in all circumstances for the system to be dead **and**
2 it is reasonable in all circumstances for work to be carried out on or near the system when it is live **and**
3 suitable precautions are taken to prevent injury including the provision of protective clothing. Work should only take place when **all** three conditions are met.

Regulation 15 (working space, access and lighting): adequate space, access and lighting shall be provided at or near where work is being done with electrical equipment.

Regulation 16 (persons to be competent to prevent danger and injury): persons engaged in electrical work must have technical

knowledge or experience necessary to prevent injury or danger or must work under the appropriate degree of supervision.

What Safety Representatives Can Do.

1. Demand proper training for everyone who has to work with electrical equipment.
2. Insist that all equipment is tested and maintained at regular intervals by a competent person.
3. Ensure that all faulty equipment is mended or replaced right away.
4. Make sure Regulation 14 on work with live systems is complied with to the letter at all times. Switch off first!
5. Make sure that all arrangements for earthing, circuit breaking, cutting off supply and rendering equipment dead function in all foreseeable circumstances.
6. Insist that no equipment is run near to its strength or capability under either normal or adverse conditions.

Memorandum of Guidance on the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989. Available from HMSO, £4.00. Electrical Safety in Schools. HSE Guidance Note GS23. From HMSO, £2.25.



Grim death figures for building workers

DPP fiddles as workers die

150 people were killed in construction sites in 1988/89, according to figures recently published by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE). For all their blitzes, the HSE made no impression on the regular toll of three deaths a week which has been the pattern of the past few years. The HSE took 683 prosecutions against construction firms in the year, and secured 592 convictions. The average fine was a mere £608.

Incidents and inspections led to 153 improvement notices and 2575 immediate prohibition notices. The HSE only visits 8 per cent of all workplaces every year, it's a safe bet that there are many more sites where an enforcement notice would have been justified.

This year the carnage continues unabated. A survey of HSE Area Offices' construction accident figures for one week in August revealed four dead and 229 injured - and the survey was incomplete. The HSE said that this was traditionally 'a quiet period'. And as we write this article news has come in that two scaffolders were killed when a hydraulic platform collapsed on the M5 near West Bromwich; and one painter was killed, one injured and one lost when a cradle collapsed on the Severn Bridge.

The Construction Safety Campaign (CSC) has repeatedly called for police investigations with a view to possible manslaughter charges in such cases. George Henderson, Transport & General Workers Union National Construction Secretary, supported this view recently when he said, 'We need a few prestige jobs to face some manslaughter charges and that will put the wind up the whole industry. Suddenly safety will become the prime concern of everyone. How many workers must die before

this happens? Ann Elvin, mother of Paul who was electrocuted and killed on a construction job at Euston Station (see D.H. 25 & 27), has been told by the Director of Public Prosecutions that they will not even investigate to see if manslaughter charges are appropriate. Ann and her family will have to settle for a prosecution of the main contractor by the Railways Inspectorate in the Crown Court. Ann has sworn to continue to fight her son's cause.

Meanwhile, the country's most significant health and safety dispute rages in the North Sea. 'The construction workers who have been on strike in the North Sea Oil Industry and the thousand workers who were sacked for protesting about safety should be congratulated,' commented Tony O'Brien, CSC National Secretary, 'not punished for protesting about conditions in an industry which continues to annually slaughter 150 people and maims thousands every year. If the HSE inspectors cannot do their job of ensuring workers safety and the

employer's only concern is profit then there is only one course left for those who work in that environment. Workers must have the right in law to refuse dangerous work without the threat of victimisation and the sack hanging over them.'

Save our sight



On 21 June the European Communities' VDU Directive at last completed its passage through the European legislative machinery. As EC legislation it is binding on all the member states. However, it does not come into effect until 31 December 1992, and it has to be implemented in each state through national law. We will have to wait and see

what the UK interpretation of the mini-mum health and safety requirements will be. The Directive applies to all work stations with a visual display screen, and covers anyone who regularly uses a VDU, even if only for part of their job.

Employers must assess work stations to evaluate risks to workers, particularly in terms of eyesight, physical problems (such as repetition strain injuries) and stress. Workers must have regular breaks away from the screen throughout the day, although the frequency and duration of breaks are not specified. Secret devices or software for checking work rates are banned. Workers are also to be entitled to free eye tests before starting screen work and at regular intervals thereafter, and if they experience visual problems that may be due to screen work. This obviously conflicts with the UK's recent abolition of free eye tests under the NHS. The Department of Health has already said (in a letter to Stephen Hughes MEP) that employers will be expected to foot the bill.

The Directive is couched in quite general terms, but a Technical Annex lays down detailed specifications for:

1. equipment: display screen, keyboard, work desk/surface, work chair, document holders and footrests.
2. environment: space, lighting, reflections and glare, noise, heat, radiation and humidity.
3. operator/computer interface: suitable software, and no checking of work rates without the worker's knowledge.

Because the Directive is rather vague on some points, and likely to be watered down more in the UK interpretation, it's up to trade unionists to negotiate the best implementation.

Council Directive 90/270/EEC of 29 May 1990, on the minimum safety and health requirements for work with display screen equipment. Published in Official Journal of the ECs, no L 156/14.



A penny a bag

Yorkshire and Humberside's Low Pay Unit has just published A Penny A Bag, an invaluable introduction to campaigning on homeworking. It usefully summarises major studies and outlines the Homeworkers Charter of Demands as well as TUC, ILO and EEC statements and good retailer agreements. The book gives useful insight into how local women have organised as well as examples from other areas and countries.

Myths are destroyed, such as that most homeworkers are doing it 'on the side', and that ethnic group businesses exploit their own. It does clearly highlight that homeworkers are almost all women and that black women consistently receive the worst rates of pay and the most dangerous work.

A homeworker quoted in the book sums up the stress, isolation and hazards of her situation: 'At least in a factory I would know how much I should be earning just by talking to other people. But here I don't know where the work comes from and I don't know where it's going. No one tells me anything and I don't see anyone. All I know is all this noise and dust in my home is not good for the children.'

A Penny a Bag: available from YHLP, Field Hill Centre, Batley Field Hill, Batley, WF17 0BQ. Tel 0924 - 443853

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