

# THE DAILY HAZARD

## Schools safety crisis

Teachers, their trade unions and school governors are very concerned about health and safety problems in schools. They say that under-investment in school buildings, cuts in staffing levels and increasing pressure of work on all school staff have led to the current crisis.

These concerns are on top of those surrounding attacks on teachers such as the murder of headteacher Philip Lawrence outside a north London school and the tragic events at Dunblane where 16 children and a teacher were killed.

Barbara Jones, a member of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) is just one of the thousands of teachers who are very worried.

'It's not only the sensational dangers that concern me but also the scandalous state of dilapidated buildings, overcrowding in classrooms, toilets and play-areas, and the stress and overwork to which staff are exposed,' said Barbara. 'Measured in real terms, capital investment in schools has fallen to a half of what it was in 1975 and this means the government is creating the risks to children's and teachers' safety in schools.'

### Governors

School governors are frequently unaware of their role as the school's employer and their statutory duties and civil liabilities regarding health and safety in schools.

Anna Lindup, a parent governor in Lambeth, quotes the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) when weighing her responsibilities: 'Their advice to me and other governors is that courts, when judging where liability lies, have decided that reductions in government education subsidies are not a

relevant factor. This means that if we do not meet statutory duties under education, employment or safety because of government cutbacks we will be judged to be guilty. The implications are frightening.' ACE has established that 40 per cent of secondary education premises are substandard.

NASUWT branch safety officer, John Humphries said: 'Rather than helping with the management of health, safety and welfare of those involved, local management of schools (LMS) has proven a means of clouding the issue. Instead of a clear responsibility on the Local Education Authority (LEA) to pay for maintenance and repair of their properties the Board of Governors' and head teacher now face the prospect of having personal responsibility for their school.'

### Contractors

It is not only teachers and pupils who are in the firing line. Unison safety representative, Mary Evans, is concerned for her members who work in privatised services like school cleaning.

Mary said: 'Under the Government's privatisation scheme they are employed by individuals who have won the contract by making the lowest bid and are not meeting their contractual and legal duties to do risk assessments on chemicals and provide protective clothing to people involved in cleaning. The Council should make sure they don't break safety laws. It's disgusting the way that school staff and the children are being exposed to more and more risks.'

### Asbestos

The National Union of Teacher's decision to serve a writ on Greenwich education authority



From 'The Teacher', NUT.

over the death of Ms. Shirley Gibson, a teacher who died in October 1993 from the asbestos related cancer, mesothelioma, shows how serious the range of hazards in school is. (See *Daily Hazard* No.41).

An inquest ruled that on the balance of probabilities Ms. Gibson, who was 37, died as a result of exposure to asbestos which occurred during her employment between 1983 and 1993 at Plumstead Manor School.

Doug McAvoy, General Secretary, National Union of Teachers (NUT) said: 'Asbestos continues to be present in many schools throughout England and Wales endangering the health of pupils and teachers alike. The early death of Ms. Gibson underlines the dangers that pupils and teachers are exposed to.'

'This action is a warning to Government and local authorities that action must be taken to protect our children and teachers,' Doug continued. 'The Government has even refused to require local authorities to check their school premises to establish whether or not asbestos is present.'

### Seminars

- The Centre is holding a series of meetings to brief governors, parents and teachers on the action to be taken to meet statutory duties.

The first meeting is scheduled for south London and will take place at 7.30pm on Thursday 10th October at Southwark Trade Union Support Unit, 42 Braganza St, London, SW17 3RJ. Tel: 0171 582 0996.

# CHIPping away at COSHH

Previous warnings by the London Hazards Centre (*Daily Hazard* No.42-Fudge and chips) about the shortcomings of the Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994 (CHIP 2) are proving well-founded.

Callers to our advice line report manufacturers and suppliers of chemicals which do not appear on the CHIP approved supply list as not self classifying these chemicals and not providing information, despite legal duties to do so. Employers also fail to give workers information about the chemicals they work with. The reason given — the chemical is not on the list so it is not dangerous.

This failure of manufacturers and suppliers to comply with the law undermines the employers' ability to carry out assessments required by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH). The further failure of employers to demand fuller information from suppliers means that COSHH assessments are inadequate and they are putting their workers' health and safety in danger.

Safety Representatives need to be alert and ready to use their

rights to demand this information themselves. It is particularly important to note the following:

1. If the chemical is not on the CHIP approved list for supply the manufacturer or supplier has to self-classify it.

CHIP 2 requires manufacturers and suppliers of dangerous chemicals for use at work to provide a safety data sheet covering a given list of headings. If the chemical is on the approved list this information is straightforward to obtain. If the chemical is not on the list then they must classify it themselves and prepare a data sheet. Procedures are set out for classifying substances (single chemicals) and preparations (mixtures of chemicals). The fact that a substance is not on the CHIP list is no reason not to provide information.

2. CHIP safety data sheets are not the only source of information for determining whether a substance is hazardous under COSHH.

COSHH defines a substance hazardous to health as any substance or preparation which, amongst other things: is listed in the CHIP approved supply list as

very toxic, toxic, harmful, corrosive or irritant; has a Maximum Exposure Limit or Occupational Exposure Standard (listed in HSE Guidance Note EH40); is a substantial concentration of dust; or is a substance which creates a hazard comparable to the above. The COSHH Approved Code of Practice (ACoP) gives more detail about how to decide whether a substance is hazardous. You should ask what other sources of information your employer has used to determine how hazardous the substance is.

3. All manufacturers and suppliers of substances have overriding duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HSWA) to provide information.

HSWA Section 6 requires manufacturers and suppliers of substances to the workplace to ensure that the substances are safe and without risks to health and that they have been tested to ensure this, and to provide safety information, including updates, about the substances and the relevant tests carried out and the conditions needed to ensure that they will be safe and without risk to health at all times.

HSE Guidance explains that good data sheets are a way of providing the information required.

The CHIP ACoP makes it clear that the duty in CHIP 2 to provide a safety data sheet is in addition to that in HSWA S6. If a data sheet is not provided under CHIP, the manufacturer or supplier still has to provide information under S6, you should demand this.

COSHH places a legal duty on employers not to carry out work with hazardous substances until a risk assessment has been done and preventive measures implemented. An important preventive measure is the provision of information, instruction and training to employees about risks and precautions. If your employer has not carried out a suitable risk assessment based upon adequate information and has not given you information about the chemicals you work with you should not work with these substances.

Both the CHIP Regulations ACoP and the COSHH Regulations ACoP are available from HSE Books Tel: 01787 881 165 and some major book shops.

## De-regulation battle goes on

De-regulation has gained further ground in the UK but has been dealt a hefty blow in the European Parliament.

The UK Government's continuing obsession is revealed in a new document, *Regulation in the Balance: a guide to regulatory appraisal incorporating risk assessment*. Published by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) with the backing of John Major, it requires Ministers to perform a cost-benefit analysis of all proposed legislation.

Ministers must show the benefits of any proposed legislation outweigh the costs to business. Any concept of social justice or quality of life takes second place to ensuring conditions for making profits are maintained. Jargon is deployed to suggest a quasi-scientific basis for the exercise but the document admits that it boils down to guesswork or political prejudice. A choice example is: 'people's perception equals the general public's subjective view of the

risk of harm as opposed to its estimate by experts.' The underlying tone shows the Government will become that bit more pro-business and even less keen on introducing European legislation it doesn't like.

One idea the DTI has latched onto is the Health and Safety Executive's Tolerability of Risk Framework. This is the notion that below a threshold of intolerable risk, a balance can and must be struck between risks and the cost of reducing them. Apparently: 'there is a region of risks which society will tolerate in order to secure the benefits.' Some sections of society, workers and citizens, say, are likely to have different standards of toleration than others, businessmen and experts, for example. The Government and DTI are not keen to address this point.

The de-regulators have got little sympathy from a recent resolution adopted by the European Parliament. Two years ago, the European Commission

set up a 'group of independent experts,' known as the Molitor Group, to provide advice on deregulation. The Molitor Group strongly advocated deregulation to promote business competitiveness and profit.

The European Parliament has now come up with a different view, stressing the importance of gaining citizens' consent to legislation. Their resolution states: 'The provisions of labour law and those governing health and safety at work must not be impaired, and need to be made more transparent (i.e. understandable) for those concerned.' The Molitor contention that deregulation in this area will improve competitiveness and employment is completely unsubstantiated. It makes it clear that any reduction in standards is unacceptable. The Parliament calls on the European Commission to find out why member states have not introduced health and safety legislation properly and wants

legislation brought in to improve and encourage good health and safety practice.

The GMB has seized the opportunity to call for the Molitor report to be scrapped. Nigel Bryson, the GMB director of health and safety, said: 'the Parliament's report is further evidence that without the restraining arm of Europe, the UK Government would deliberately put workers' health and safety at risk.'

Hopefully, another deregulation initiative has been blocked but what is certain is that the anti-safety zealots are still active. Continuous campaigning is required to keep them at bay.

*Regulation in the Balance: a guide to regulatory appraisal incorporating risk assessment*, published by the DTI, catalogue number 0001. Available free from 0171 510 0146.

Copies of the European Parliament Resolution can be obtained from the Centre.

# EMFs — Electromagnetic fields

**The London Hazards Centre receives many enquiries from people concerned about exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs). Their concern is understandable since a number of research studies have suggested a link between exposure to EMFs and ill-health. Despite this, the Government insists there are no health risks and is strongly resisting pressure in the European Union for specific legislation.**

## What are EMFs?

Electromagnetic fields are a form of non-ionising radiation and are created wherever there is a flow of electricity. An EMF is made up of an electric field (measured in volts per metre) and a magnetic field (measured in milli-, micro- or nano-tesla). Electric fields occur wherever there is a voltage — the higher the voltage, the stronger the electric field. Magnetic fields occur where there is a current — the greater the current, the stronger the magnetic field. A magnetic field only exists when the current is switched on. Both electric and magnetic fields become weaker the further away from the source. The frequency of the waves (the rate at which they oscillate) and their shape, as well as the strength of the fields may all be important factors in determining the effects on health.

EMFs occur naturally and also come from manufactured sources. Natural EMFs range from the earth's own magnetic field to waves generated by electric storms to the body's own essential electric activity. These natural EMFs are of a very low strength with a frequency of about 8 Herz(Hz) and are beneficial to health. Manufactured EMFs, which have higher frequencies, come from overhead power lines, electric wiring in buildings, electric appliances etc. It is these that are of concern.

## How do EMFs affect the body?

The main hazard arises from exposure to oscillating electric and magnetic fields which can affect body tissue in the following ways:

- 1) Electric fields (the voltage in the air between conductors) cause the electrically resistant (dielectric) body cells to vibrate and to heat up at high frequencies.
- 2) In oscillating magnetic fields (the space around electric conductors) electric currents are generated in body tissue which is a conductor.
- 3) There are changes in the electric

charge of body cells and tissue which cause dust particles and charged gas molecules to be attracted to those parts.

## Health risks

The risks to health associated with exposure include:

- 1) Impairment to the immune system which reduces the ability of white cells in the blood to kill tumour cells and fight disease.
- 2) Adverse effects on the central nervous system, brain and glands which are connected with cancers and other physical and emotional problems.
- 3) Influence on the body's control of cell growth, including tumour formation and foetal development.
- 4) Adverse effects on the skin.

A number of studies have shown an increased incidence in cancers, particularly leukaemia, amongst children living near overhead power lines. Studies in Shropshire and Wolverhampton found an increased rate of depression and suicides amongst adults living near electric cable lines. Unexplained clusters of tumours, leukaemia and miscarriages have occurred amongst workers in some office environments equipped with high numbers of display screen equipment. High rates of leukaemia, breast cancer and other cancers have been found amongst workers exposed to high electric and magnetic fields.

## The home and community

EMFs in the home are generated by all domestic electric appliances and wiring circuits.

1. At a distance of up to 30cm:

— high intensity fields (above 40 microtesla) are generated by appliances like clock radios, dishwashers, electric hand tools, food processors and mixers, shavers, TVs, hairdriers, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines and microwave ovens.

— medium intensity fields (above 1 microtesla) are generated by some of the above appliances and

others such as toasters and irons.

2. At a distance of 100cm: — low intensity fields (under 1 microtesla) occur from all the above appliances.

In the community some intense exposure arises near overhead and underground electric power lines, and electric sub-stations.

## The workplace

As well as from the above, workplace exposure is from power generators, electric cables and wiring circuits and from electric equipment including hand and machine tools, welding equipment, induction heaters and recorded tape bulk erasers. Exposure levels are often much higher because the machines use higher electric currents. Arc welders, during welding, are exposed to levels 100 times greater than the level of intense domestic exposure.

## Official advice on EMFs

The scientific community cannot say conclusively that manufactured EMFs are safe. The Government and the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) continue to insist there are no health risks yet the NRPB has stated: 'Not all effects (on the body) are attributable to heating or current flow and there are some reports which have linked cancer with low level magnetic field exposure.'

The NRPB has recommended a 'safe' exposure level of 1600 microtesla for mains power frequency magnetic fields, which is so high that virtually no occupation needs to be regulated in terms of worker exposure to mains frequency EMFs.

The industry pressure group, The Electricity Association, in their 1995 'EMF Briefing', have also admitted that some scientific studies make connections between exposure to EMFs and diseases such as leukaemia and brain cancer. Despite these admissions, those involved in electricity generation, distribution and supply are keen to encourage the

belief that EMF exposure is not connected to human diseases and illnesses and that manufactured EMFs are covered by naturally occurring EMFs and made harmless.

## Minimising exposure

The London Hazards Centre believes that until there is conclusive proof that EMFs present no risk, the precautionary principle must be adopted, which means that the hazard must be eliminated or the risk minimised.

Electric fields can be shielded against easily and cheaply in new buildings and equipment. Magnetic fields are best dealt with by designing them out or shielding them where they are generated. Once they leave their source it is very difficult to shield them effectively.

Only if the above cannot be achieved should the key principles of minimising exposure listed below be applied:

- a) use low voltage and shielded equipment
- b) cut off the current and unplug equipment when not in use
- c) keep your distance

## Action at home and in the community

- try to assess what external sources of EMFs there are eg overhead and underground cables, the proximity of electric substations, particularly if you are thinking of moving house.

- ask the Electricity Association (01483 507 514) to advise you on how to go about establishing this and ask them to survey the electromagnetic fields in your home.
- for advice on EMF problems and opinion on surveys call the independent advice organisation, Powerwatch, on 01353 778 814.
- you can take action to prevent a sub-station or pylon from being installed nearby or to have them removed. Some solicitors experienced in environmental legal issues have taken on and won cases of this kind, although there is no guarantee of winning.

- unplug electric appliances and transformers when not in use.

- ensure that places where you spend long periods of time are at least 4 feet from appliances that are 'working' e.g. electric clocks, radios, televisions, immersion heaters, storage heaters, sewing machines and electric fires.

- use low voltage battery driven equipment where possible.

- try to ensure that mains adapters/battery eliminators are not next to your bed.

- arrange lounge seating and beds so that your head as not in close to wiring circuits in walls, this is especially true for common service wiring routes in blocks of flats.

- unplug electric overblankets or underblankets before going to bed.

- remember that walls don't significantly reduce EMFs; ask yourself, 'what is on the other side of this wall from my body'.

## Action at work

- follow the principles set out above.

- use the legal rights in the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 to take up health and safety concerns with your employer (see *Daily Hazard* No.42).

- ensure that your employer's risk assessments under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992 include the risks of EMFs.

- if your employer is planning a new building, follow the example of the World Bank and ensure that EMFs are minimised.

- ensure your employer selects equipment with low emissions.

- ensure your employer selects equipment which does not generate strong magnetic fields.

- ensure that VDUs meet Swedish MPR II standard as a minimum. The Swedish TCO 92 standard is better but not as readily available.

- ensure the workplace is screened with good electric conducting plates.
- switch off, unplug or isolate electric equipment from its power source whenever possible.

- keep your distance from EMF generators.

# Euro safety week

Events are currently being organised for The European Week For Safety & Health At Work which will run from 7-13th October 1996.

Safety Reps who wish to participate in this week could use it for inspections, safety talks, training courses, questionnaires or larger events to raise awareness of safety issues at their workplace. Reps should call their trade union safety department to see what they are planning for this week,

promotional materials etc.

The UK's main contribution to it will be the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) promoting its lame 'Good Health is Good Business' campaign. The HSE has published a poster and newsletter and is planning some regional events, but details were not available at the time of writing.

Details of the HSE's activities and their free newsletter are available from 0345 181819.

## LONDON HAZARDS CENTRE CONFERENCE AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

10.00 a.m. — 4.30 p.m.

Saturday 16th November 1996

University of London Union,  
Malet Street, London W.C.1

(nearest tube station: Goodge Street)

This year, in a new initiative, the Centre is going to combine its Annual General Meeting with a Conference on key health and safety issues facing workers and trade unions. The Conference will help guide the Centre in its work over the next year and provide a much needed forum in London for the discussion of health and safety policy. It is open to everyone interested in health and safety.

The programme starts with Tony O'Brien, Secretary of the Construction Safety Campaign, speaking on pressing the next government for decent workplace standards. In the afternoon there will be sessions on custodial sentences for employers and human resource management and it's implications for workplace safety. The Centre's AGM will be held after these discussions.

Contact the Centre for details.

## New RSI book

The Centre's new handbook on repetitive strain injuries (RSI) will be launched in November.

Repetitive strain injuries of all kinds cause a heavy toll to British workers in all sectors of the economy. However, workers organised in trade unions and support groups are fighting back. Although there have been setbacks, unions have forced employers to adopt prevention strategies and have won compensation for their members.

Our booklet will describe the various specific conditions that are included in the umbrella term RSI; organising strategies in the workplace to prevent RSI; safety representatives rights; give information on treatment and rehabilitation; provide information on legal action and compensation; and include a resources and contacts list.

Look-out for launch details nearer the date.

*RSI Hazards Handbook*

£4.50 to community, tenants and union groups or £12 to commercial organisations.

Add 50p per £5 order for post and packing. Available mid-November.

### SPECIAL OFFER

FOR ORDERS PLACED BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR!

All other publications half price with every order of the RSI Handbook up till the end of 1996. See enclosed leaflet or call the Centre for an order form.

## LHC safety training programme

These invaluable courses are available at the Centre for £40.00 per person per course (or £20.00 via the LBGU Bursary Scheme):

Tuesday 5.11.96 Health & Safety Law

Thursday 14.11.96 General Health & Safety

Tuesday 14.1.97 Hard Labour: Stress At Work

Tuesday 4.3.97 Asbestos In The Workplace And The Community

Thursday 6.3.97 General Health & Safety.

(Cheques should be made payable to London Hazards Centre).

The Centre can also provide safety training on other topics at your workplace. Call us to discuss your needs.

London Hazards Centre receives grant funding from the Bridge House Estates Trust

## Thanks to donors to our RSI appeal!

We have so far raised £502.00p. Donations are still welcome. Meanwhile, we would like to thank the following organisations and individuals for their generous donations to our appeal fund:

AEEU: London Airport: EETPU Section  
ASLEF: Willesden Branch  
CPSA: CAA HQ Branch  
Drysedale & District Residents Association  
GMB/APEX: London College of Printing  
IPMS  
MSF: East London Branch

MSF: St Pancras 0389 Branch  
Potteries Action on Safety and Health  
TGWU: 1/1538 Branch  
UNISON: Dental Practice Board Branch  
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