

Date Received

THE DAILY HAZARD

Construction Safety Campaign members protest outside Floyd offices



Watney Market sewer disaster

Three young men died needlessly in a sewer at Watney Market, Aldgate, East London on 22nd September. The Health and Safety Executive's report to the Coroner's inquest will hopefully shed some light on the full circumstances of the incident. But enough facts have emerged to paint a grim picture.

The residents and traders of Watney Market had been complaining regularly to Tower Hamlets Council about a persistent foul smell and bad drainage. The Council had investigated many times but never found a permanent solution. A few days before the deaths, the Council asked the plumbing contractors, Floyd Construction, to investigate and

clear the problem but Floyd's didn't act immediately. Service roads then flooded with foul water and Floyd's were again asked to attend urgently.

A Council report says that they only expected Floyd's to rod and clear surface water drains but in the event the problem was in the sewers. Four of Floyd's workers arrived at the market on Saturday and tried to clear the blockage with an acid solution which didn't work. One of the workers entered a sewer access and didn't reappear. Two of the others then went in to find out what had happened to the first worker and they didn't reappear. When the fourth worker investigated

he was overcome by fumes. The Fire Brigade was called by onlookers and had to use breathing apparatus to rescue the three in the sewer. All four were taken to hospital.

David Richardson (19) was dead on arrival at hospital. His brother Paul (17) and Steve Hammond (32) never regained consciousness and their life support machines were switched off the following Monday. Paul Barker (20) was the only one of the four to survive suspected hydrogen sulphide gas poisoning.

Eye witnesses say that the four workers had no protective clothing or special equipment. This suggests that they were inexperienced and untrained in this kind of work. Trained sewer workers would automatically recognise the need to test for hydrogen sulphide and other gases before entering a sewer. It is known to be one of the greatest risks of the job. Trained workers would also have informed the Council of their intention to go underground and would have vented the sewer by uncovering other sewer access holes.

None of this was done. Questions must surely be asked about whether the Council and contractor had made sure that safe systems of work were in operation and that the men were properly trained.

Representatives of the Construction Safety Campaign (CSC) went to the site the following day and asked residents and traders about the incident. Angered by what they heard, CSC members protested outside the offices of Floyd Construction in Hackney Road during the following week. As the CSC demonstration went ahead the Floyd business sign was being painted over and the protesters were told the company had moved to Chigwell in Essex. The CSC has called for a public inquiry into the accident and for the police to investigate the incident to see if manslaughter charges are applicable.

No justice for Paul Elvin

The family and friends of Paul Elvin demonstrated outside the Middlesex Guildhall Crown Court in Parliament Square on 19 November. Supported by members of the Construction Safety Campaign, they were there to see the prosecution of one of the contractors, Cawberrys plc, investigated by the HSE after Paul died at work on Euston Station two years ago. British Rail and three other contractors involved in this case won't be prosecuted. Cawberrys stated in court that they would not entertain any claims for compensation from Paul's family. The family reacted with anger when Cawberrys were fined £5,000 with £5,000 costs for breaches of Sections 1 & 3 of the Health & Safety At Work Act 1974 for not issuing a safety handbook. Ann Elvin, Paul's mother, said "A £5,000 fine is not justice for my son. We will be looking for funds so we can take out a private prosecution against all parties in this case. It's the only way to get justice!".

See also *Daily Hazard* 25, 27, 28.

LONDON HAZARDS CENTRE

The Centre's main source of funding is the London Boroughs Grant Scheme (LBGS).

Our grant from the LBGS has effectively been cut by 30% since 1988 and we now face a budget deficit for this financial year. We are making every effort where possible to generate income from the Centre's work. But to ensure that we can maintain and develop our work, we're appealing for donations and encouraging affiliations.

Donations are welcomed no matter how great or small. Affiliation brings a year's supply of this newsletter, news of other publications and activities. Pay for our work if you have funds. Any work that is paid for helps to ensure that we can continue to work for those without financial resources.

APPEAL

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RSI: Why are we waiting?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has finally published *Work related upper limb disorders: a guide to prevention*, roughly three years late. Work related upper limb disorders is the official expression for repetitive strain injuries (RSI). This document basically appeals to the better instincts of employers by suggesting that if they keep their workers fit, they will get more out of them in the long run. Whether there is actually a constituency waiting to receive this message is open to question. However, the HSE has put its hand on its heart and declared itself in favour of virtue and against sin.

All of the advice in the document is general and abstract. Nothing refers to specific jobs or industries except for a few photographs of manufacturing processes. There is not even a list of jobs which are known to be prone to RSI. In short, this is a well meaning but utterly ineffectual effort at dealing with a major source of occupational injury and will have no influence on anyone who is not already disposed to take these issues seriously. This document is promised to be the first of several new publications on RSI; all one can say is that the remainder of the series will have to meet a much higher standard if they are to have any impact.

Further evidence of official concern comes from the decision of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to study all the available evidence on RSI. This body comprises employer and union representatives and doctors and makes recommendations to the government on the list of injuries which should qualify for social security benefits. The Council might, or then again might not, recommend some improvement in the eligibility for benefits some time next year.

There is equally little movement towards obtaining compensation through the courts. Earlier this year three employees of the Inland Revenue received out of court settlements of about £35,000 for keyboard-induced injuries. So far, only one union, the NUJ, has actually moved a writ to have a case heard in court. A number of other unions are reported to have cases in the pipeline but are seemingly reluctant to push for a settlement.

The feebleness of the British responses to RSI is pointed up by developments in other countries. Bell Pacific, a California based telecommunications company, paid out \$13.5 million in compensation for keyboard-induced injuries in 1989 and has announced an \$8 million programme of training and ergonomic improvement. The New Zealand Accident Compensation Corporation, which is a joint union/employer body, awarded \$NZ6.7 million in no-fault compensation for RSI injuries in 1989.

RSI support organisations and campaigns are gradually being established in the UK, but because of the enormous extent of injury, they urgently need to come together and set up a powerful national campaign. The second national RSI conference



being held in Nottingham in March will be another important step towards this objective. The Council is taking evidence up to 31st December 1990 and can be contacted via:

The Secretariat, Industrial Injuries Advisory Council, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT; 071 962 8066.

HSE's 'inexcusable' failure

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has been given a new industry to police, a mere fortnight after publication of a report which exposes the unhappy fate of workers already under HSE 'protection'.

The Cullen public inquiry report on the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster, published on 12 November, recommended transferring safety inspections in the North Sea from the Department of Energy to the HSE.

Exactly two weeks previously, the Parliamentary Ombudsman issued a report condemning the HSE's 'inexcusable' failure to protect the workers of a battery factory in Sheffield. Stallite Batteries had driven a coach and horses through the Lead Regulations, one of the most detailed and supposedly most carefully enforced workplace health laws. For six years EMAS, the HSE's Employment Medical Advisory Service, had knowingly allowed incorrect medical testing of workers' blood: as a result, poisoned workers had continued to work with lead when they should have been suspended on full pay.

Tony Lloyd, the Labour health and safety spokesperson, called immediately for the resignation of the HSE's director-general, John Rington. Lloyd has asked the Commons Employment Select Committee to investigate the HSE and recommend new legislation and effective enforcement.

Rington claims that a recent reorganisation has brought the situation under control. This flatly contradicts his own statements in recent HSE annual reports that the HSE suffers from inadequate resources, a claim echoed by the factory inspectors' union IPMS.

But the Stallite disaster isn't just about resources: it's also a result of the HSE's long pursued philosophy of 'advising' employers rather than prosecuting them. This is a unique approach to criminal law enforcement, to put it mildly, and several recent academic studies have exposed its failure. So watch out, oil workers!

◆ If you know of a failure by the HSE, inform the chair of the Select Committee on Employment, Ron Leighton MP, at the House of Commons, London SW1, and send us a copy.

SECOND NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES

Take these notes about the incidence of repetitive strain injury, Ms Holmes!



9.30 a.m. - 4.30 p.m. SATURDAY 16th MARCH 1991
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CENTRE, 61b MANSFIELD ROAD, NOTTINGHAM
 for further information & application form, contact:
 Wendy Lawrence, Nottingham RSI Support Group, 26 Balmoral Road, Colwick, Notts NG4

MANUFACTURED MINERAL FIBRES (MMFs)

"Because of the likelihood that it is the physical properties of asbestos fibres that cause respiratory cancer, similarities in the physical properties of manmade mineral fibres and asbestos, evidence that manmade mineral fibres are capable of producing cancer in animals, and clear evidence that non-asbestos fibres are capable of producing cancer in man, it would be irresponsible to conclude that ordinary manmade mineral fibres, whether made from rock, slag or glass, do not carry some risk of cancer."

P.E. Enterline in *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, September 1990, vol. 47, no. 9.

What are MMFs*?

Manufactured mineral fibres (MMFs) have been produced for almost 100 years. MMFs is a term for fibrous substances made primarily from rock, clay, slag or glass. They are predominantly composed of silicates, usually in an amorphous (as opposed to crystalline) form. There are three main types: continuous filament glass fibres, insulation wools and special purpose fibres. Mineral wools have wide application as thermal and acoustic insulators in construction, shipbuilding and aerospace. They are commonly used in buildings and offices as loft and cavity wall insulation and for lagging pipes and tanks.

The material can be loose, moulded to fit pipes etc., or in the form of batts and blankets. Reinforced products can be formed by stitching the wool onto wire mesh or mixing it with wet concrete. Continuous filaments can be converted into reinforced plastics and building materials and into textiles. Fibre glass is also used in air and liquid filters and in fibre optics.

Right from the start, MMFs have been known to be irritants. They have also been suspected to be cancer-causing agents. Recently there has been a campaign by the manufacturing companies to claim that MMFs are safe. In fact, they pose serious hazards both to manufacturing and construction workers and to consumers.

Health effects of MMFs

1. The Lung Cancer Controversy. There are conflicting views on whether MMFs cause lung cancer. Some companies have presented a partial view claiming that the materials are safe. They argue that the fibres of MMFs are different from those of asbestos and in any case dust has been eliminated from the modern production process. But a meeting organised by the International Labour Office in 1989 concluded, "Available data are insufficient to draw conclusions concerning the relative potency of various fibre types." The World Health Organisation classifies glasswool, rockwool, slagwool and ceramic fibres as possible human carcinogens.

* Usually known as Manmade Mineral Fibres (MMMFs)



Worker handling glass fibre waste

2. Other Cancers. MMFs are implicated in the cause of cancer of the mouth and throat. There have also been reports of stomach, bladder and skin cancer.

3. Respiratory Diseases. There is evidence that MMFs can produce non-malignant chest illnesses in both production workers and members of the public exposed to fibres. Inhalation of glasswool fibres by a man fixing a thermostat resulted in a severe case of pneumonia.

4. Skin Complaints. Irritation and skin lesions arise rapidly upon skin contact with MMFs, especially in the case of people not normally exposed to mineral wools. Once household furnishings become contaminated with mineral wool fibres, there is considerable difficulty in removing them.

5. Eye Damage. There are a number of reports of lesions of the eye, conjunctivitis and keratitis resulting from exposure to MMFs.

6. Other materials found with MMFs. Insulation wools may contain a range of other hazardous materials. A common example is formaldehyde-based resin which can emit formaldehyde for a considerable time. Formaldehyde is a strong irritant and a suspected nasal carcinogen.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

At Work. MMFs are covered by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations. COSHH requires employers to remove, substitute or control hazardous substances. If none of these is possible, workers must be provided with adequate protective clothing and equipment. In the production of MMFs, the key to control is to minimise the number of respirable fibres. Sir Richard Doll, a leading authority on this subject, has proposed a limit of 0.2 fibres per millilitre. However, the newly reduced UK maximum exposure level is still a whole 2 fibres per millilitre for an 8 hour period (the former dust limit of 5 mg per cubic metre is also still in force).

Ensure that regular air monitoring by a recognised method is performed to measure the concentration of fibres - anything over 10 per cent of the official limit should be treated as a hazard. Engineering controls must be introduced to enable satisfactory dust and fibre levels to be achieved.

In the use of MMFs eg. in the construction industry, argue first for their replacement by safer materials. If that is not possible, stringent conditions should be demanded regarding local exhaust and general ventilation, cutting under wet conditions, use of vacuum or negative pressure cutting tools and double-

sided facing on batts and blankets. Protective clothing and equipment should be provided to installers including gloves, overalls, goggles and respirators which can deal with all fibre sizes. Such clothing should be laundered after use. N.B. Barrier creams will not provide any protection.

In the Home. If possible, do not allow MMFs to be introduced into your home - insist that contractors use a safer material (eg polystyrene chips). MMFs may be installed as loft or cavity wall insulation or to insulate water tanks. Damage or weathering can produce contamination of clothes in airing cupboards, or of the water supply if the tank does not have a proper lid, or release of fibres through structural gaps into other rooms. If you are worried that contamination has taken place, ask the local Environmental Health Department to carry out air monitoring or dust sampling. Damaged insulation must be either sealed or removed but only by a properly qualified contractor. Demand to see a job specification before work starts - procedures must be guaranteed not to release fibres. DIY is not recommended - if embarked upon, proper protective measures must be taken.

The Centre recently undertook a literature search on MMFs hazards. To obtain a copy, write to us enclosing a large (A4) s.a.e. (38p stamp).

Pesticides: doctors say safety first



The British Medical Association (BMA), the main doctors' organisation in the UK, has published a major study of the effects of pesticides, *Pesticides, Chemicals and Health*.

The main conclusion is that pesticides should only be used when they are known to be safe: "The BMA endorses the principle that until we have a more complete understanding of pesticide toxicity, the benefit of the doubt should be awarded to protecting the environment, the worker and the consumer. More particularly, where there are serious concerns relating to the safety of a particular pesticide, its use should be withdrawn or restricted until a new risk/benefit analysis can be made." These are sentiments that the London Hazards Centre is glad to applaud. It is views such as these that underpin our campaign to have toxic pesticides such as lindane, TBTO and PCP banned.

The BMA calls for the development of a Government pesticides policy with five key elements: reduction in the use of pesticides, use of other means of pest control, improved regulation, improved access to information for the public and education of everyone in the pesticides industry in the avoidance of hazards.

The report pinpoints weaknesses in the UK regulatory system. It draws attention to the conflict of interest in the Ministry of Agriculture, which regulates food production as well as pesticide

safety. It also notes the lack of enforcement of pesticide laws due to the inadequacies of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The procedure for review of the toxicity of pesticides is criticised both for its slowness and its secrecy. In effect, the BMA accepts that public safety concerns are well justified by the performance of the authorities.

This report should be required reading for the Health and Safety Executive, who commenced a review of lindane in 1988 but have still to publish it. The HSE has also started a review of older pesticides which underlines the unsatisfactory nature of this type of exercise. The HSE argues that because information on mammalian toxicity (a key piece of evidence on how poisonous a material is) is unavailable or incomplete for many older pesticides, they will not consider any

toxicity data at all, but confine their assessments only to the extent of exposure. Thus many highly poisonous compounds may be approved for future use merely on the grounds that they are not widespread at present.

But with a clear statement by a body like the BMA that this state of affairs cannot continue, the shambolic state of UK pesticides regulation is once more exposed. The present arrangements simply do not protect workers or consumers. Pressure must be increased on the authorities to allow the use of pesticides only after they are proved to be safe.

A fully illustrated book on this report is to be published by Edward Arnold, London, in Summer of 1991 (ISBN: 0-340-54924-6). Meanwhile, it is available at a cost of £30 from the Public Affairs Division, BMA, BMA House, Tavistock Sq. London WC1.

Violence to staff

The Union of Shop, Distributive & Allied Workers (USDAW) has just published two useful reports on violence to staff.

Violence to Staff - Report of a Survey shows that employers are by and large ignoring Health & Safety Executive (HSE) guidelines as set out in the HSE's free pamphlet *Violence to Staff* IND(G) 69L.

Managers worry more about the security of their goods than of their employees. The "customer is always right" policy of many retail outlets was a special target for criticism by workers surveyed by USDAW. The union wants to see proper consultation, monitoring and training procedures, higher staffing levels, improvements to design and layout of shops, and improved support for victims. *Violence to*

Staff: an USDAW Guide is aimed at the Union's own officials and safety representatives. It contains a useful checklist to help approach the problem in a methodical way.

The reports cost £3 each (£5 for both) and are available from USDAW, 188 Wilmslow Road, Fallowfield, Manchester M14 6LJ.

New tenants information service

A new national information and advice centre for tenants is to be launched in the New Year. The Tenants' Resource and Information Service (TRIS) will also offer training courses aimed at providing tenants with organising and communication skills. It will sponsor research to make sure that tenants can get their point of view across. Members will receive news and legal updates and materials on key housing issues. Initially, the service will be for council, housing association and co-op tenants.

Write to TRIS, c/o Newcastle Tenants Federation, 4th floor, High Bridge House, 21 High Bridge, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 1EW. Tel: 081 748 4114 or 091 232 1371.

Your health's your wealth

This vibrant video shows tenants taking health issues into their own hands. Tenants of two large housing estates in Scotland teamed up with academics to conclusively prove the causal link between damp and children's ill-health. The video should be seen by tenants groups and trade unionists for its powerful analysis of the destruction of family health by poor housing and for the inventive campaign techniques used by the tenants.

Your Health's Your Wealth, 50 minutes, VHS, £35.00 (inc. p&p & VAT). Available from Edinburgh Film Workshop Trust, 29 Albany Street, Edinburgh EH1 3QN. 031-557-5242. Also available on loan from London Hazards Centre.

LONDON HAZARDS CENTRE PUBLICATIONS

- ▲ **Sick Building Syndrome: Causes, effects and control.** £4.50.
- ▲ **Toxic Treatments: Wood preservative hazards at work and in the home.** £5.95
- ▲ **Repetition Strain Injuries: Hidden harm from overuse.** £6.00 (£3.00 to trade union and community groups).
- ▲ **VDU Hazards Handbook: A worker's guide to the effects of new technology.** £5.45.
- ▲ **Fluorescent Lighting: A health hazard overhead.** £5.00 (£2.00 to trade union and community groups).
- ▲ **Health & Safety: A guide for women workers in the cleaning & catering industries.** £5.00 (£2.00 to trade union and community groups).

All prices include post and packing. Bulk orders: contact the London Hazards Centre for discount details.

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