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Companies are killing 8000 people a year with Cancer

A recent report by the HSE has found that around 8000 people are dying each year from Occupational Cancers (HSE, 2010)! Many of these are caused by encountering hazardous substances at work and should therefore be entirely preventable. There are also around 14,000 new cases of Occupational Cancer reported each year. The process industry, by its nature, clearly represents a major Industrial contributor to these statistics due to the nature of many of the processes and the substances used in them.

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002 provide legislation that must be complied with by all companies throughout the EU, but very often, to really deal with the problem means taking action over and above the requirements of the law. One good example of this is the Workplace Exposure Limits, which dictate the maximum allowable exposure levels for many dangerous substances. These levels in themselves, however, are not considered necessarily as 'Safe'! In other words, just because there is a limit of exposure does not mean people are not going to get ill.

Cancer is a relatively modern killer. For example, lung cancers were virtually unknown a century ago. Since then almost 100,000 synthetic chemicals have been introduced to our workplaces (O'Neill, 2007), so people are being exposed to more hazards and more substances than ever before. The HSE study has determined that

over 5% (8019) of all cancer deaths in the UK are caused by occupational carcinogens with 13679 new registrations annually for occupationally caused cancer.

Of the process industries chemical manufacture and processing is clearly a hot-spot for the use of hazardous substances. According to the HSE, cancer-causing chemicals include:

- Arsenic and related chemicals - glass, metal and pesticides
- Benzene – oil and gas and petroleum
- Benzidine and cadmium dyes - textile industry
- Beryllium and related chemicals - aerospace and metal industries
- Chromium pigments - paint production
- Some fertilisers and pesticides
- Various organic solvents - rubber, textiles, paint, printing and industrial cleaning

Clearly, where such substances are integral to a production process, removal is not an issue and so work is needed in such industries to ensure that exposures and being reduced as far as possible!

Asbestos is another major contributor to the death toll and will continue to be the case long for some time to come due to the delayed onset of the diseases caused by exposure to it. The process industry is not immune to this due to the extensive use of asbestos in many plants in areas such as boilers, pipes, furnaces, heat exchanger, pumps and numerous others. Although most modern insulation materials do not contain asbestos, there are still huge quantities in use. Great care is needed to make



sure such asbestos is not disturbed and that approved contactors are used if in any doubt whatsoever as to the nature of any such material.

Companies can take themselves out of these statistics by starting with some fairly straight forward steps including learning more about what is required and finding out exactly what hazards might exist in their workplace. People often feel that dealing with the regulations and carrying out the necessary monitoring in-house is complex, but this does not need to be the case. Getting on the right training course should perhaps be the first port of call, as this will take the 'mystery' out of the subject and give you the confidence to tackle the issues you are going to face.

As far as monitoring is concerned, setting yourself up with the right equipment to get started doesn't even cost much money, and the process is very straightforward, so long as you have the steps of a procedure in place, the results will follow. On and on-going basis, personal monitoring for many substances can be carried out using a gas detector, and the cost of these in recent years has plummeted, making it accessible as a very effective tool.

Specialist Company Castle Group Ltd has some straight forward solutions for companies that want to stop making people ill from exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace. These include a competent person training course covering all the fundamentals of the regulations and monitoring strategies, sampling equipment and personal monitors.



Simon Bull, MD for Castle and Compliance expert said, “People often seem to think air-sampling and COSHH compliance is difficult, but we can show them that this is not the case. Companies really need to embrace this subject if we have a hope of saving lives in the future.” Our approach is to encourage education and training for Health and Safety Professionals as well as employees so that issues can be tackled in-house, especially in industries where the potential hazards are numerous and varied, like those often found in the process industry.

Works Cited

HSE. (2010). *The Burden of Occupational Cancer*. Imperial College London, the Institute of Environment and Health, the Health and Safety Laboratory and the Institute of Occupational Medicine.

O'Neill, R. (2007). *Occupational cancer/Zero cancer*. International Metalworkers' Federation.

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Simon is Managing Director of Castle Group Ltd, who specialise in compliance solutions for Health, Safety and Environment issues. Simon trained in Business Studies at Leeds, and has worked for the past eighteen years in the health and safety and environmental arenas. He has been heavily involved in the development of products and training courses for various aspects of these fields and regularly presents on subjects such as Noise, Vibration, COSHH and Environmental monitoring. He is a member of the Institute of Acoustics, where he is an active member of the measurement and instrumentation committee, and is a Member of the Institute of Diagnostic Engineers and an Associate Member of IOSH.