

CO poisoning

Incomplete combustion of piped gas and ineffective ducting of exhaust gases continue to go uncontrolled even though reasonable control methods exist. Liabilities for employers, landlords and gas appliance fitters are at issue.

HSE is the lead body on risk management for this issue. A recent report (CRR01 386) finds:

“The number of deaths in Great Britain caused by severe carbon monoxide poisoning has been in the region of 25-30 for several years.

Over the last ten years, specific progress has been made in a number of areas. For example, the Gas Appliance Directive (GAD) made it unlawful to sell new domestic gas appliances unless they are fitted with anti-vitiation devices. These prevent an appliance from operating either when the combustion air contains a dangerously low level of oxygen or when the spillage of combustion products from a flue are sensed by a thermally sensitive device fitted to the appliance installation.

In Great Britain, the law for landlords was changed to ensure appliances have an annual safety check and that evidence of such a check having taken place is now given to tenants.

A further example has been in the growing field of domestic carbon monoxide alarms. In contrast to previous policy, domestic CO alarms are now promoted and sold by a major British gas service company and this has led to more than half a million units being installed in properties over the last two years alone.

Despite these advances, no significant reduction in the number of deaths and serious injuries from exposure to carbon monoxide has yet been observed. There are probably many reasons for this, eg the considerable number of domestic appliances still being used which were installed before the GAD.”

Comment

The rate of deaths reported here may not appear particularly alarming, but the figures are hotly disputed.

In addition, there is considerable scope for long term morbidity caused by prolonged low level exposure e.g. flu-like symptoms and depression. Medical recognition of chronic CO poisoning is incomplete. Some factions dispute the existence of chronic exposure effects. There have been high value compensation awards made in favour of employees who were found to have become unable to work as a result of such chronic morbidity.

HSE is developing a reporting scheme that may improve the understanding of this issue.
