

# WHAT IS HEALTH AND SAFETY ALL ABOUT?

## Death, Injuries, Disease

Health and safety is seen by some people as a cold and uninteresting subject. Others regard it as separate from "real" trade union issues. The victims of a failure to deal with health and safety see things rather differently, and sadly, there are too many victims.

In the UK nine people are killed every week at work. Many workers take the view that, "It will never happen to me", yet, according to the Health and Safety Executive predictions, one in 17 workers is likely to have some sort of occupational accident every year. There are 1 million accidents at work every year.

There are more deaths each year through occupational ill health than through occupational accidents. Furthermore, it is estimated that every year 2.5 million UK workers are suffering from occupational related ill health caused, or made worse, by their work.

## Accidents are Preventable

The GPMU deals with hundreds of compensation cases every year as a result of things that go wrong at work. Yet the vast majority of these accidents are preventable. Repeated studies by the Health and Safety Executive have shown that something like 80% of accidents need never happen. In nearly all cases information and advice on safe working practices is readily available. The main problem is the failure to apply that experience in practice, and the failure to act when clear warning signs appear.

## Management Failure

Reviews of fatal accidents by the HSE have found that in at least 70% of cases "positive action by management could have saved lives".

These reviews have identified the most common causes of accidents as:-

- the lack of adequate safe systems of work
- failure to provide proper physical safeguards
- poor management organisation
- inadequate information, instruction and training.

All of these identified causes are, in fact, covered by legal requirements upon employers. The simple fact is that the failure of employers to meet their legal duties led directly to the deaths of people at work.

## Blame the Victim

When accidents do occur there is still a universal tendency to blame the victim, to put the cause down to "careless workers", in spite of the clear evidence to the contrary. Superficial investigation of an accident will often lead people

to come to this quick, but often mistaken, conclusion. When underlying factors are considered, the true cause will often come to light.

The careless worker theory is appealing but usually wrong, it blames individuals rather than looking at working methods and organisation. Accidents can be prevented, it is known how to prevent them, information is widely available. Making sure preventive measures are applied in the workplace is the problem.

## A Separate Subject?

One of the difficulties that arises in dealing with health and safety is that it is often regarded as being separate from other workplace issues.

Employers have a tendency to separate health and safety problems from production problems. Whereas a production problem would be dealt with immediately, a health and safety problem will often be left to be dealt with later, or referred, for example, to the Health and Safety Committee.

It is also true that trade unions and workers have had a tendency to separate health and safety issues from industrial issues. As far as the GPMU is concerned, health and safety is an industrial issue.

## Too Technical?

Another difficulty is that health and safety laws and guidance tend to be relatively detailed and often involve technical issues. This, in itself has a tendency to put off some people and give an impression that health and safety can only be dealt with by experts. In fact, the basic principles behind tackling health and safety problems are quite simple.

- identify hazards
- assess risks
- implement control measures
- monitor what has happened
- provide information and training

Using these principles most problems can be addressed and conditions improved.

## No Accidents

If companies are having accidents on a regular basis, they clearly do have a problem. However, it cannot be assumed that a lack of accidents, near misses or ill health means that health and safety is being dealt with properly, good fortune may be playing a part. Indeed, in small companies accidents will be a relatively rare event, and are therefore a very poor measure of how well a company is performing on health and safety.

## The Cost of Accidents

Where accidents are occurring they cost far more than most organisations imagine. Studies by the HSE have shown that there is an "accident iceberg", where the hidden costs can be anything from 8 times to 36 times greater than the immediately visible costs.

Those visible costs, usually insured against, cover injury, ill health and damage. But the hidden, usually uninsured, costs arise from such things as damage to products, materials, plants and buildings; legal costs; emergency supplies; production delays; overtime working; investigation time; managers' time and fines.

The HSE has estimated the average cost of an accident as £3,500, and the average cost of an ill-health absence £9,000.

The overall cost of work accidents and work-related ill health to employers is estimated to be between £4000 million and £9000 million a year. This is equal to between about 5% and 10% of gross trading profits. By reducing accidents and ill health, employers are also reducing costs and improving the profitability of their businesses, as well as meeting legal obligations.

Employers often say they cannot afford to spend money on health and safety. The real question should be, "Can they afford **not** to invest in health and safety improvements?".

### Check the Situation

Preventing accidents and ill health, and meeting published standards and guidance is the objective. The only way to check on all these things is to look at what is actually happening.

Therefore, the workplace itself must be checked and monitored. Inspections and audits are a very important part of this process. Employers must make arrangements to inspect their control measures and investigate potential hazards in their companies.

Safety representatives have legal rights to carry out inspections to check on their employers' performance. Any system of dealing adequately with health and safety must involve regular inspections of the workplace.

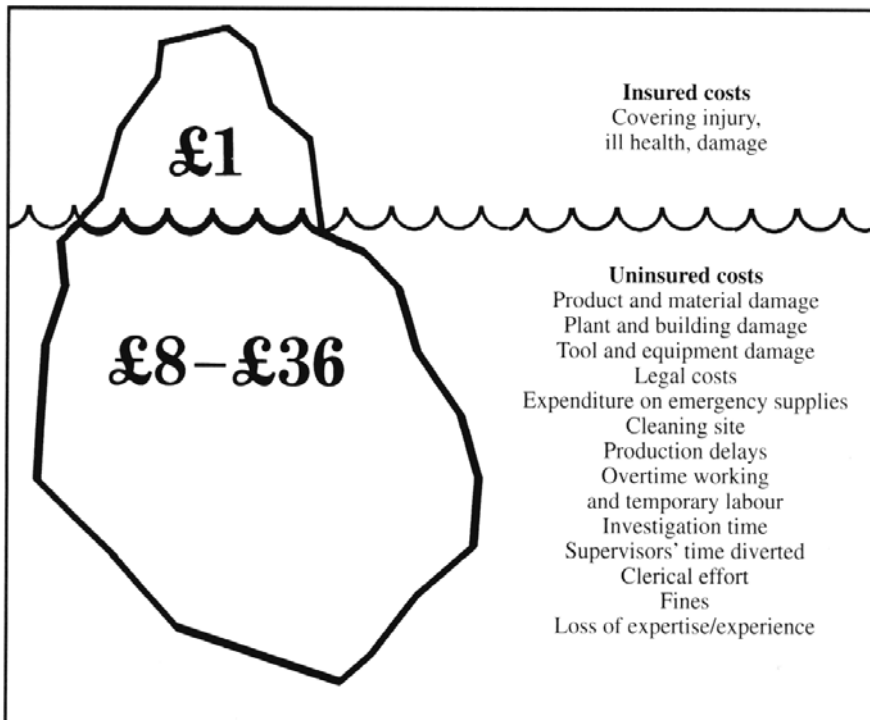
### Who Will Do It?

The main burden of meeting health and safety laws falls upon employers. Unfortunately, all too often employers fail to match that challenge. Many small companies remain ignorant of their basic health and safety duties and often have not even produced adequate safety policies, never mind implemented them.

Health and safety law is enforced by Government health and safety inspectors. They have the power to prosecute companies and individuals within companies, and can also issue prohibition or improvement notices. The problem is that there are too few inspectors and their resources are limited. The majority of companies will probably never be visited by a factory inspector.

Health and safety problems arise in the workplace and must be solved in the workplace. If employers fail to meet their legal requirements and the factory inspectors are too few and far between, then the onus rests with the workforce and their union, to make sure that health and safety improvements take place.

Diagram - "Accident iceberg"



Source: The Cost of Accidents (1992) HSE