

The risk of silicosis

As I've outlined in previous articles, the HSE are increasingly looking at some of the hidden risks workers in industry are being exposed to. We have known that there is a risk of lung diseases caused by exposure to asbestos fibres but it's only relatively recently silicosis has become a topic for concern, writes Phil Pinnington

The Institute of Safety & Health (IOSH) has been running a year-long campaign on the subject 'Time to breathe' and this aims to make employers aware of the terrible consequences of breathing silicon dust. It has a very fine sand-like consistency, does horrendous damage to the air sacks in the lungs and those diagnosed have their life expectancy cut.

So, why should this affect the glazing industry?

Well, many large factories that grind and polish glass do so using equipment that keeps the area wetted down, but what happens to the residue once the water evaporates? Also, some use silica-based glass cleaning materials and these too expose workers to inhaling silica in the course of their working day – so, what should you be doing?

Managing the risks

Every factory unit should identify the hazard of silicosis and take all the necessary precautions to manage it. If you spray, then spray in a well ventilated booth, preferably without an operator present. If this can't be avoided, then give the operator effective personal protection equipment, such as face masks and introduce rules about personal hygiene, such as washing the hands and mouth before eating, drinking or smoking. All these activities are direct routes for silica to enter the lungs.

Cleaning: your regime and arsenal

If wetting down and cleaning is part of a monthly or weekly maintenance regime, then you need to ensure that it is not simply dry brushed. The risk increases significantly, not only to the employee at the time, but to workers who are in the vicinity. For large areas it would be prudent to invest in an H-type vacuum cleaner using a HEPA filter. This is specifically designed to contain hazardous particles.

Prep your team

But it's not enough to simply put systems and processes in place and expect them to be used and followed. Like any other control measures, you need to work at making it custom and practice in your workforce. Senior and middle managers need to 'get it' before you have the first chance at convincing the workforce.

Using the resources available on the HSE website and for GGF members, access to the Federation's H&S support, you can help educate those exposed and start to make control of silica a norm in your business. □

The GGF's health and safety committee meets quarterly to discuss key issues affecting the industry. If you are interested in finding out more about the GGF and its health and safety function, please email info@ggf.org.uk



Phil Pinnington, health and safety director for the GGF

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