

READERS' LETTERS

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

BUILDING BETTER HEALTH

Constructing Better Health, the national scheme for occupational health in the construction industry, published the National Industry Standards for the management of work-related health in 2007. Since then occupational health has moved up the political agenda, with new initiatives being launched on wellbeing, health promotion, employer helplines, fit notes and rehabilitation, to name but a few. However, while health risk management issues are at last being addressed in a strategic way and ceasing to be the poor relation of safety, there are still concerns about the message reaching down to SMEs.

The UK construction industry employs around 3.1 million people, with 80% of firms employing five or less workers.

Larger companies and contractors tend to have the resources to ensure compliance with occupational health standards and new developments. Indeed, many have excellent health promotion programmes and initiatives such as reduced subscriptions to gyms, counselling and physiotherapy. What of the smaller firms and the self employed where many struggle to act on and understand the most basic and well-known risks to health such as asbestos and dust exposure? These are fundamental issues which larger contractors have long since tackled successfully and moved on.

What is beginning to emerge is that health risk management is moving toward a two-tier system of worker protection – those who work for large companies and those in the smaller or the self employed – what chance of implementation of the new strategies when even the basic messages are still not getting through?

A voice of reassurance and leadership comes from London's Crossrail project, which has written a health standard into its contracts making it mandatory for contractors to provide occupational health for all of their supply chain. Moreover, Crossrail gives guidance and advice on how this can be achieved and then audits its contractors' compliance. As a not-for-profit body committed to improving the health of the UK's construction workforce, Constructing Better Health fully endorses and supports this initiative, without which the messages, guidance or leadership can be lost as the work passes down the supply chain to the smaller employers.

Crossrail's approach is an excellent workable strategy for construction and one which should be adopted across all UK industry.

**JANE COOMBS, OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH DIRECTOR,
CONSTRUCTING BETTER HEALTH**



Photograph by Luke Hayfield

BORDERING ON INDIFFERENCE

I read with interest 'The Care Sector's Fire Safety Lessons' in July's edition of *Safety Management*. Since the tragic deaths of 14 elderly residents at Rosepark, Scotland has introduced legislation for the fitting of sprinklers in all new care homes. But this isn't the case in England. So why are people in care homes in England receiving less protection than those across the border?

A report conducted by BRE Global back in 2004 concluded residential sprinklers are cost effective for all residential care homes for elderly people, children and disabled people. This report was reviewed again this year and the conclusion reinforced.

As a result, at the Chief Fire Officers' Association, we are pushing for a change in the official guidance. The information is available, so why shouldn't the guidance be updated accordingly? Arguably not doing anything with this independent research is negligent. What would we do if we had a repeat of Rosepark here in England? We could be in an impossible position of justifying doing nothing. But we don't want to be finger pointing which is why we call on the government to lead with these changes now.

Time is of the essence; the latest census revealed the population aged over 65 has increased by 10.9%. In recent years we have enjoyed a decline in fatal fires; however, this could be set to change due to the increasing numbers of elderly people who are unfortunately more vulnerable to fire. Until the government acts on this, we urge those responsible for health and safety in the care sector to fit sprinklers. If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you always get and none of us want a repeat of Rosepark.

CHRIS ENNESS, CFOA LEAD ON SPRINKLERS

PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

It seems to me health and safety companies overcomplicate their client recommendations sometimes. Clients can be resistant to health and safety as it is, and it is not uncommon for me to risk assess a property and find the initial recommendations haven't been carried out and reasons usually centre on money and time.

We are often asked to review reports which have incorrectly recommended installing fire alarm systems and extinguishers within communal areas, and even stated it is a legal requirement. This creates unnecessary work for property managers and is a needless strain on their budget – hardly surprising it gets left on the backburner. Others have claimed front doors to flats and compartment fire doors within communal areas need wholesale upgrades. Again this is rarely the case if the doors met with the building standards when they were installed.

The Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 says fire detection, warning equipment and fire extinguishers are required 'where necessary'. We have found few property managers are aware of the government guidance, Fire Safety in Purpose-Built Flats, which says communal area fire alarm systems are both 'unnecessary' and even 'undesirable.' Often the property manager has thought the opposite – that it is a legal requirement.

H&S companies must keep up to date and give clients simple solutions, rather than just copying and pasting recommendations. Together we can help improve the reputation of the industry.

NICOLE EDEN, DELCO SAFETY LIMITED