



Hazardous Times

Greater Manchester Hazards Centre
Resolving occupational health problems by supporting workers

Despite the government's Revitalising Health & Safety initiative launched in 2000, little progress has been made in achieving the targets set for reducing work-related deaths, and ill-health has actually increased. Every day workers are killed in incidents at work; other die as a result of past exposure to toxic substances or injury. Hundreds more suffer major or minor injuries, and in the course of a year thousands develop acute or chronic illness. Much of this is preventable. Workplace safety and health laws are inadequately enforced by an under-resourced Health & Safety Executive or poorly funded local authority environmental health departments.

The balance of power between employers and workers is inherently unequal, but trade union organisation helps redress this imbalance. Evidence shows that where trade union safety representatives are active, there is half the incident and injury rate of unorganised workplaces. But even with a trade union it is hard for workers to enforce their rights to safe and healthy working conditions. To improve workplace conditions requires employers to develop a strategic partnership with workers.

GMHC works with individual workers, trade unions and safety representatives to support their efforts to resolve workplace problems and prevent ill-health and danger. By providing advice, information and other tools the Hazards Centre helps to empower workers to participate from a more informed position and to redress some of the imbalance between employer and worker in the workplace.

We work in a number of different ways. Our primary contact point is our telephone advice line, and the enquiries we handle lead us to develop a range of other activities that support and supplement the advice work, and extend into complementary areas. We develop and maintain a library and database of information sources; produce general factsheets and information on common enquiry topics; develop education and training materials on key topics; run training sessions for trade unions and workers; run three victim support groups; and involve ourselves in wider campaigns locally, nationally and internationally for better laws and standards. We have undertaken joint worker - employer training to help them develop effective partnerships, and we advise voluntary sector organisations on effective management structures for the health, safety and welfare of workers, volunteers and clients.

GMHC enquiry service. Our main contacts are individual workers or trade union safety reps seeking advice by telephone. We also get enquiries via letter and e-mail. We start with questions to make sure that enquirers have identified all the potential issues, then give them information about legal, industry, professional or other standards related to their query. Depending on the complexity, this can require considerable research. We help them identify appropriate ways to resolve the problem, and to develop appropriate arguments to enable them to put together a case to present to their employer. We may help by drafting a letter. We encourage them to adopt a pro-active approach by suggesting solutions to the problem, rather than just demanding that the employer resolve it. We suggest action at two levels – first to overcome the immediate risk and then a longer-term solution to permanently protect the health of workers. We work on the principle of empowering workers by giving information, advice and support to enable them to interact with others to resolve problems and improve conditions to protect both their own and other workers safety and health. Our telephone advice is confirmed and extended by follow-up letter. All our enquiries are different because all workplaces, employers and environments are different. Our help is tailored to the specific needs of each enquirer. We get some enquiries that indicate such poor conditions that the only response is to ask an enforcement officer to visit. Enquiry topics run from Asbestos to Zoonoses - some examples follow.

Diesel fumes.

A constant problem in garages, workshops, bus depots, loading bays and warehouses. We tell workers about the substances in diesel exhaust fumes, and their health effects. We draw attention to the general duties on the employer under the Health & Safety at Work Act to protect workers health; the requirement to assess risks and take action to minimise them under the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations; the requirement to conduct an assessment under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations, and the need to remove toxic substances from the atmosphere in the workplace. We give advice on the use of effective general and local exhaust ventilation, and systems of work to prevent diesel fumes polluting the workplace.

We discuss ways that the worker could approach the employer to put the case for improvement, and help them formulate a case, write a letter or whatever is appropriate. Where the workplace has a union organisation, we will help the representative put complaints in writing, conduct a workplace inspection, access documents and information, and discuss how

they can raise the matter, and initiate a strategic discussion on the safety committee.

Temperature

Without fail at the beginning of the winter, and during hot spells in the summer we get multiple enquiries about a minimum or maximum allowable temperature in the workplace. Excessive heat or cold both have a debilitating effect on a workers performance, leading to discomfort, irritability, stress, lack of concentration and possible injury. We advise on temporary heating or cooling, and longer-term solutions such as air conditioning, heating systems improvements etc.

Risk assessments

Many enquiries highlight the fact that employers fail to conduct adequate risk assessments for all types of work. We give information about the legal requirements and good practice on risk assessment, and help develop the arguments to enable individuals and safety representatives to raise the issues and make suggestions on how to improve the risk assessment process, and the management of health, safety & welfare in the workplace.

Repetitive strain injury

Workplace inspections by union safety reps at one educational institution in Greater Manchester revealed serious health problems amongst VDU users, and an absence of workstation assessments. Despite repeated complaints from staff, and high levels of absence, no action was taken. Working closely with GMHC, the union tried for over one year to get management to meet them to discuss how the problems could be resolved, and workers health be protected in the future. Finally, when all else failed, the union contacted the HSE to ask for enforcement action.

Following a visit by the HSE inspector, it was confirmed that the employer was contravening Section 2 of the Health & Safety at Work Act and Regulations 2 & 3 of the Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992. An Improvement Notice was served, and the institution was required to identify and record all VDU users; revise its workstation self-assessment process; appoint staff to be responsible for managing the assessment process and train them to ensure their competence; implement effective control measures and draw up an action plan. They would not have got into this position if they had listened to the union branch, and consulted properly in the first place.

Chemicals

Many workers use chemicals daily but often have little or no information about any risks to their health. This is also an area where employers risk assessments are weak, and safe working methods problematic. Many workers develop both acute and chronic health problems which are either caused or exacerbated by the chemicals they work with.

Our approach is to find out what the chemical is, how its being used, what symptoms it causes and what control measures exist. We discuss with workers how to interpret the Material Safety Data Sheet (or how to get one if they don't have it), the hazards and risk to health, any UK occupational exposure levels, control by possible elimination and substitution, then engineering control measures, and as a last resort personal protective equipment.

We advise on ways to approach their employers to get them to comply with the law. If there is a trade union, then we encourage safety reps to work with employers to adopt best practice. Where workers have been made ill, we can help with IIDB claims, advice on civil compensation and medical experts.

Support groups In the mid-1990's, we became increasingly aware that 3 areas of work in particular were growing. We were getting an increasing number of enquiries on asbestos-related diseases, repetitive strain injuries and were also being contacted by the families of people who had been killed at work. Our three support groups were established as a response to this increase:

- Greater Manchester Asbestos Victims Support Group was established in 1994
- Manchester Area RSI Support and Action Group in 1995, and
- Bereaved by Work in 1997, to give support and advice to the families of those killed at work.

Our asbestos group now has a dedicated worker, and dealt with *circa* 200 cases in 2003-04. The work includes explaining about the diseases caused by asbestos, helping victims claim compensation from the state or previous employer, assisting victims to complete state benefits forms & liaison with the DWP; we link to the wider network of asbestos-victim groups around the country, and campaign and lobby for better protection for everyone.

The RSI support group runs a monthly evening meeting, where people come to give each other mutual support, share experiences, learn about developments in research, cases, treatments etc. We produce a fact-pack and maintain a database of medical specialists and physiotherapists.

Bereaved by Work helps people over the initial period following the death at work of a family member. We give advice about inquests, about benefits and compensation, and generally provide sympathetic support and information. The HSE has a publication which gives our contact details.

Training Directly stemming from our other work, we have developed a wide range of training and other materials and provide a range of courses & workshops for different organisations. Examples are:

- Basic health & safety for staff and volunteers in voluntary sector organisations
- Building an effective safety management system for voluntary sector organisations (with an associated manual)
- Risk assessment training for the voluntary sector
- Workshops and conferences for the NW TUC Safety Representatives Network

- 3-day induction course for trade union safety representatives
- A joint management-union course on workplace organisation to improve safety & health
- A number of issue-based courses, such as VDU workstation training

We also undertake consultancy work for voluntary sector organisations. doing risk assessments, workplace audits, advising on management of risk, and safe systems of work.

Campaigns We are a part of the national Hazards

Campaign, a network of organisations that campaigns for safer workplaces and improvements in workers health, safety and welfare. Our asbestos group has taken the lead in a national campaign to defend the interests of asbestos victims from the old Turner & Newall company, and for reform of the state benefits system for asbestos victims.

We promote Workers Memorial Day, and campaign for its formal recognition as a day to commemorate those who have died of work-related causes. We also work with sister organisations in Europe

What they say about us

Quotes from our clients:

- ✓ Practical advice, information and how to use it is invaluable
- ✓ Extremely valuable, fast response and good information
- ✓ It's a great help having comprehensive information I know I can rely on
- ✓ Company now beginning to see the connection between the work and musculo-skeletal problems.
- ✓ Made management take us seriously
- ✓ Wouldn't have known where else to go
- ✓ Helped us replace an unsafe process with something better
- ✓ Help provided by GMHC is proving invaluable; very professional approach

Our organisation We are a not-for-profit

voluntary sector organisation, since 1987. We have a management committee of 6, 3 staff members, a volunteer one-day a week and a volunteer asbestos advisor.

Most of our income is self-generated; from fees we charge for some services; making & selling Workers Memorial Day commemorative ribbons; donations and affiliations. Our advice service is partly funded by a grant from the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities.