

January 1999

Presentation by Nerys Williams, Head of EMAS, "Challenges for the Millennium and Beyond"

Nerys introduced her subject by giving us a brief history of EMAS, which was established by an Act of Parliament in 1972, thereby pre-existing HSE by some two years. Since April 1998, EMAS had been restructured with newer powers of enforcement, equivalent to those of a Senior Specialist Inspector, to issue notices. They would still continue to advise on matters of Occupational Health (OH).

The challenges to OH in the future stemmed from:-

- The changing structure and organisation of labour with, say, people having two jobs.
- The social expectations of the population are higher.
- The nature of risks are different, more nebulous, and overlap with domestic life, eg. stress.

The methods of reducing ill health may be summarised as:-

- To give access to sound advice.
- Plugging the gaps in the existing sources of information.
- Identifying what works.
- Establishing health improvement targets or surrogate reductions in exposure.
- Attempting to distinguish between established and "new" conditions.

The way forward is to adopt a strategy based on the following lines:-

- An HSE Discussion Document.
- Some preliminary views are:-
 - a) More enforcement/advice from HSE.
 - b) Health and Safety training for everyone.
 - c) SMEs want more assistance in problem solving.
 - d) Employees need more information.
 - e) Employers need to be held more financially accountable for the costs of accidents as, for instance, drivers are for hospital treatment where insurance companies refund NHS costs.

The challenges in the future for the HSE include:-

- Achieving greater transparency in its activities.
- Access to information.
- Challenging and Complaining more.

- Greater public involvement.
- Dealing with the "softer issues" such as Sick Building Syndrome and Passive Smoking.

Regarding the Improvement of Occupational Health, the HSE perspective is:-

- Adopting a "Health and Safety Management" approach to eliminate the problem before it arises.
- Increasing the involvement of safety representatives.
- Developing intermediaries (like BHSA in the past year).
- Continuing to promote accreditation and certification schemes.
- Providing more information.

Whereas the Government Perspective is :-

- Addressing inequalities in access to help and information.
- Developing partnerships with industry and commerce in order promote standards of 'best practices'.

The most cautionary wisdom is that

"Occupational ill health continues to occur because we fail to implement what we already know."

Looking forward to 1999/2000, Nerys said that HSE would be addressing:

- HAVS (where she mentioned recent civil action with a tree surgeon, the huge award to mineworkers and possible future awards to workers in the gas, shipbuilding and stonemason industries).
- Gas Safety.
- Legionella.
- Good Health is Good Business, Stage 4 - likely to enforcement of Stages 1,2 and 3.

In concluding, Nerys said that the likely areas of interest in the year 2000 would be Manual Handling and Musculo-skeletal disorders.

- with more agencies working more closely together, addressing the inequalities which exist in getting access to information.
- Getting greater public involvement through the development of "partnerships"

Members' Questions

Mark Hoare of Birmingham University referred to the mineworkers awards and asked if there were any aspects of occupational health, like HAVS in the mines,

which are disregarded at the moment but whose true significance may only be recognised in the future?

Nerys replied that there might be problems with mineral oils and that there was likely to be a growing problem with the use of Computer Mice as the effect of the IT revolution became more apparent.

Chris Onion of Avesta UK asked if there was any advice on the dangers of Mobile Telephones. Nerys said that the source of knowledge on this was the National Radiological Protection Board and that the eminent epidemiologist Sir Richard Doll was conducting a study of the effects, with the support (no strings attached!) of the communications industry. **Dave Brackwell of Cable and Wireless** added that there was only low emission from Cell Transmitters with low risk for the public. The greatest area of concern was the risk from hand held units.

Nerys went on to debunk certain myths about occupational risks, such as:

- The risk of radiation injury from VDUs.
- The danger of Hydrofluoric Acid produced in burnt out vehicles eating away into flesh so perniciously that amputation was the only way of stopping it!
- That welding flash bonded a contact lens to the eye of a worker in an US shipyard. There was no proof of this incident!
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David Hughes observed that as far as HAVS and Lifting were concerned, the influence of piecework was a deciding factor in persuading potential victims to disregard the risk to their own health! He quoted an example of a foundry worker earning approximately £30,000 p.a.!

Nerys went on to say that the nature of the risk also affected perceptions of the true magnitude by employers and employees, alike. For instance, Isocyanate-based, two-part preparations caused sensitisation and the onset of Asthma very quickly. By contrast, HAVS from Pedestal Grinders took several years to develop, giving the employers more time to identify the problem and implement control measure before Stage 2 of the disease is reached. In the latter case, it has been a prescribed disease since 1985 and there have been objective tests for its severity for the last two years. Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, risk assessments must be done for vibrating tools.

Warwick Adams of Tilbury Douglas asked what interest EMAS would be taking in welfare conditions on construction sites. Nerys replied that they would concentrate on washing facilities. She added that new entrants to EMAS would be spending time with construction inspectors to familiarise themselves with working practices and site conditions.

John Humpherson asked about the recent publicity concerning the health risks from Medium Density Fibre Board (MDF). Nerys said that there was no hard

evidence on the risks yet. She added that publicly driven scares very rarely developed into serious risks.

As there were no more questions, the Chairman closed the meeting and asked members to thank Nerys in the traditional manner.