

Case study: Breathe Freely initiative

Summary

On 28 April 2015, Workers' Memorial Day, BOHS, the Chartered Society for Worker Health Protection, launched its Breathe Freely initiative aimed at controlling exposures to prevent occupational lung disease in the construction industry.

The Society's initiative was borne out of concerns that every year thousands of people in Britain die as a result of having breathed in carcinogenic and other hazardous substances previously in their working lives.

Breathe Freely was launched as an industry-targeted initiative, focused directly on the construction sector, in view of the fact that construction workers are at particularly high risk of contracting lung disease from the work they do.

Indeed, the UK construction sector has the largest number of reported cases of occupational lung disease of any industrial sector.

In its first two years, the Breathe Freely initiative has gathered local and international momentum, becoming embedded in the construction industry.

Next, a second phase of Breathe Freely will see the focus extended and in April 2017, around the time of Workers' Memorial Day, BOHS will launch a brand new Breathe Freely initiative to prevent occupational lung disease in the manufacturing sector.

The new initiative will run in tandem with the Society's existing construction-based initiative, which will continue.

Problem statement

It has been said that tackling respiratory ill health is the single most important factor needed to reduce work-related ill health and mortality in the UK today. The following figures illustrate exactly why this is the case:

- Every year in Britain, about 13,000 people die from diseases which were caused by the work that they do, or used to do, but some 90% - approximately 12,000 - of these deaths are caused by occupational respiratory diseases.
- About two-thirds of the deaths caused by occupational respiratory illnesses are due to asbestos-related diseases or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), such as bronchitis and emphysema.
- In addition, an estimated 33,000 people who worked in the last 12 months currently have breathing or lung problems caused or made worse by work.

- An estimated 141,000 people who have ever worked currently have breathing or lung problems caused or made worse by work.

Looking specifically at the construction sector, people are often surprised to discover that construction workers in the UK are at least 100 times more likely to die from an occupational disease than from an accident at work. The vast majority of these deaths are due to cases of work-related lung disease or cancer, largely caused by workers having breathed in dangerous chemicals and dusts at work in the past.

Around 3,500 occupational cancer deaths are caused each year in the construction sector by exposures to carcinogenic substances such as asbestos, silica, paint-related chemicals and diesel engine exhaust fumes. In addition, the construction sector is among the top five industries for deaths from COPD.

Solutions

Breathe Freely was successfully launched as a collaborative initiative with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Land Securities, Mace and Constructing Better Health as founder members. From the outset, there was recognition that partnerships are key and that Britain's burden of work-related lung disease cannot be resolved by any single agency working alone.

The [Breathe Freely website](#) has been developed, again with input from a wide range of stakeholders, as a central part of the initiative to offer a wide range of useful, practical and free resources, to protect workers' health. The website features free guidance materials, including best practice case studies, fact sheets and a Good Business Case proving that not only is good occupational hygiene the right thing to do but it makes excellent business sense too.

In April 2016, the Society launched the Health in Industry (HI) Management Standard, designed by the UK's leading occupational hygienists, and setting out best practice criteria for worker health protection.

The idea is for companies to sign up and then self-assess how they are performing using the HI Standard's solid framework of good practice.

So far, over 130 contractors have signed up to adopt the HI Management Standard tool for managing workplace health risks.

Also available via the [website](#) is a construction managers' toolkit, sponsored by Arco, offers checklists, visual standards and presentation material to assist managers in delivering talks to protect workers' lungs.

It is hoped that the increased support and take-up of the Breathe Freely guidance means that employers are becoming more aware of what the hazards are and how they can control these – and that they are putting these solutions in place.

A key message of the Breathe Freely initiative is that effective occupational hygiene solutions need not be complex. Often what is needed is an inexpensive, straightforward solution which can offer significant pay-offs in terms of creating efficiencies and reducing costs.

Key challenges faced

A number of specific challenges are associated with work-related health risks - in particular that the hazards can be invisible, silent and insidious in the long latency of their ill effects, with health problems emerging only years later.

This challenge is certainly evident in the case of work-related lung hazards such as asbestos and silica dust.

Unlike a workplace accident where the tragic consequences are immediately clear for all to see, the effects, for example, of breathing in silica dust during abrasive blasting work will take many years to become apparent.

These complexities make it difficult to measure the progress of the Breathe Freely initiative, since proof of success will only be apparent in years to come when the illness and mortality figures decline, which of course is what is greatly hoped for.

However, right now, Breathe Freely is based on the simple premise that it is possible to protect workers' health and actually prevent deaths caused by respiratory diseases through good occupational hygiene practice.

Measures of success

The Breathe Freely initiative now has over 160 signed up supporters from across the construction industry. In addition, there have been over 60 Breathe Freely talks at roadshows, events and meetings across the UK, all designed to offer practical advice on managing health and equipping attendees to make improvements on their sites. With around 1700 members in 57 countries, the Society's vision for the Breathe Freely initiative is a global one and in 2016 BOHS embarked on a new international phase of its Breathe Freely initiative in the Middle East.

In September 2016, the third annual edition of the BOHS Worker Health Protection Conference (WHPC) was held in Abu Dhabi, UAE during which construction companies were urged to take immediate action on the issue of worker health protection by signing up to the Breathe Freely HI Management Standard and becoming Breathe Freely supporters, with an excellent response received in the region.

Lessons learnt

As the Breathe Freely initiative continues to gain momentum, BOHS is focused on continuing to share its vital message and useful resources with the construction sector in the UK, the Middle East and, through its membership network, worldwide.

Having launched at the start as a collaborative initiative, Breathe Freely has continued to draw in an increasingly wider pool of stakeholders, with gratifying synergy in evidence between employers, regulators, trade unions and professional bodies, all working towards the common goal of safeguarding respiratory health at work.

The new Breathe Freely campaign for the manufacturing sector will be launched in partnership with EEF, the manufacturers' organisation; HSE; The Welding Institute; the TUC; and a number of other leading manufacturing organisations. A wide range of further organisations, both public and private, will also be invited to sign up as supporters and sponsors.

Another key lesson learnt has been the importance of targeted efforts and so, with the aim of maximising improvements in respiratory health protection at work, BOHS has confirmed the initial focus for the manufacturing initiative will be the key area of welding activities.

Outcomes for 2017 and benefits

A busy schedule of activities is lined up for the Breathe Freely initiative during 2017 and beyond. BOHS has identified an important skills gap within the construction sector, to be filled by means of a new course, entitled the Certificate in Controlling Health Risks in Construction. This new course will be piloted on 30 January 2017 and launched shortly thereafter.

2017 will see a new calendar of roadshows, with the RVT Group as a main sponsor, and the emphasis as ever on imparting practical advice to make real positive changes on sites. Also planned is new more detailed guidance on managing respiratory protective equipment, (RPE). With Breathe Freely in full swing in the construction sector, and poised for action later on in 2017 in the manufacturing industry, the message of the initiative is absolutely clear - by recognising the hazards, evaluating the risks, and controlling exposures today, a huge difference can be made to worker health in years to come.

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