

FIRST AID AT WORK

The workplace is very different in 2004 than it was when the First Aid Regulations were introduced in 1981. Employers have been addressing the issues of accidents in the workplace and investing a significant amount of time, effort and money in tackling the problem of accidents and attempting to eliminate them, or at best significantly reduce their occurrence and their severity.

Preventative Healthcare is now asked to provide refresher sessions for client companies' first aid personnel. These are undertaken on an annual basis and are requested by First Aiders, who now fortunately do not have to exercise their skills on a regular basis and therefore feel that they require practice more frequently than is provided by the statutory refresher courses required under the current Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations.

The current regulations apply to all businesses from self-employed individuals to large corporations. The First Aid at Work Regulations currently only cover employees and do not require employers to provide first aid for visitors, customers and other individuals who may be present in the workplace. At the present time perversely the regulations only address the requirements in a school, for example, of teachers and other employees and not the children. The Health & Safety Executive, however, do strongly encourage employers to consider their duty of care in general, including any first aid requirements, under the Health and Safety at Work Act, not only to their employees but also to visitors to their premises and the general public.

Changes are currently being considered by the Health & Safety Executive to the First Aid Regulations. We therefore felt it important to encourage you to review your first aid provision in the light of the current regulations, particularly as your Risk Assessments may be quite old and do not reflect many changes that may have occurred within your own organisation.

The current regulations require employers to determine what is "adequate and appropriate" in the way of first aid provision. In the modern working environment the type of industry and the type of specific hazard may no longer be the most important factor. Of increasing importance is whether an employee is working in a group or working alone, whether that employee is involved in driving significant distances, using a mobile phone, travelling abroad to inclement climates, working on sites occupied by other employers' staff or managing increasingly violent or vociferous members of the general public.

In determining the number of first aid personnel that are required to be trained by an organisation in order to fill their requirements under the current legislation, the number of employees in an organisation has to be taken into account. In a modern business setting, however, there is very little benefit of having all your qualified First Aiders in one location if your employees work alone or are dispersed on other clients' premises. First Aiders do not have to be the employees of a particular company; it is perfectly reasonable for organisations to share employees in certain situations and to design their Risk Assessments on this basis.

Selecting First Aid Personnel

Two important considerations should be given when selecting individual employees to be trained as First Aiders. These are:-

- The employee's normal duties;
- Their physical and psychological resilience.

A First Aider needs to be able to stop what they are doing and respond immediately. This is not always the case in a busy complex manufacturing unit or with maintenance staff. It may be stating the obvious but a First Aider has to be at work and therefore an individual who has a poor attendance record would not be considered a good candidate. First Aiders needs to be calm, methodical and resilient in times of psychological pressure.

Financial reward for undertaking first aid duties is a difficult and hotly debated subject. Such financial rewards may encourage the wrong individuals to volunteer.

The Health & Safety Executive in their current guidance suggest the number of first aid personnel that should be trained and deployed; for example, in a low risk environment such as shops or offices where there are fewer than fifty employees a minimum of one appointed person should be available; between fifty and one hundred employees at least one fully qualified First Aider should be available, and for every hundred employees above this level one additional First Aider should be available.

The HSE also categorises the workplace in terms of low risk, medium risk and high risk. Medium risk is defined as light engineering, assembly work, food processing and warehousing. High risk is defined as construction, chemical manufacture and extensive work with dangerous machinery or sharp instruments.

What Does The Future Hold?

Another debate currently being undertaken, in occupational health circles in particular, is the provision of automatic cardiac resuscitation machines. These require first aid personnel to undergo specific training, and a fitting question is whether it is appropriate to ask non-medical volunteer employees to undertake such responsibilities. At the present time such equipment is not readily used within the workplace, particularly as the Emergency Services have been able to increase their response times with the use of helicopters and motorbikes.

On the negative side, the last twenty years have seen a significant increase in the transmission of blood-borne viruses such as HIV, Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C. One important item now carried by many First Aiders is a CPR facemask. This acts as a barrier between blood and saliva when performing artificial respiration. There is also an Association of First Aiders (AoFA).

In conclusion, the world of work has changed dramatically in the last twenty-four years. It is important on a regular basis to review your company's first aid provision, the choice of First Aiders, the training that is available for these skilled and important individuals and the changing hazards and risks of your particular working environment. It is also important to consider new developments in equipment, training material and personal protective equipment for First Aiders.

