

Chemical Management in Occupational Safety & Health

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Chemicals are routinely used in our society and often play an important role in economic activity; their benefits are clear as we use them to clean, purify, control pests and boost agricultural production just to name a few applications. However chemicals are also one of the most pervasive hazards present in our homes and workplaces, if used incorrectly they can cause accidents and damage health and may even result in fatalities.

The management of chemicals has for many years been a challenge across the globe, in large part due to the lack of consistency in the manner in which chemicals were labelled, used, stored and disposed. The Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals known as the GHS is intended to overcome many of the challenges related to chemicals management and thereby significantly reduce the risks related to improper use, handling, storage and disposal of these substances. The GHS has been developed as a system for standardizing and harmonizing the classification and labelling of chemicals. It is a systematic, logical and comprehensive approach to:

- Defining health, physical and environmental hazards of chemicals;
- Creating classification processes that use available data on chemicals for comparison with the defined hazard criteria; and
- Communicating hazard information, as well as protective measures, on labels and Manufacturers' Safety Data Sheets (MSDS).

On its own, the GHS is not considered an international standard, however, when used along with the International Labour Standard for Chemicals from the International Labour Organisation, Convention 170, it provides the basis for compliance with international standards. Convention 170 states (in part) that "it is essential to prevent or reduce the incidence of chemically induced illnesses and injuries at work by:

- ensuring that all chemicals are evaluated to determine their hazards;
- providing employers with a mechanism to obtain from suppliers information about the chemicals used at work so that they can implement effective programmes to protect workers from chemical hazards;

- providing workers with information about the chemicals at their workplaces, and about appropriate preventive measures so that they can effectively participate in protective programmes;
- establishing principles for such programmes to ensure that chemicals are used safely”

The BEC endorses international labour standards and supports the successful implementation of the GHS by Barbados as it is of the view that this will go a long way to making Barbadian businesses more productive, while protecting them from the social and economic costs of accidents or ill health resulting from poor chemical management practices. Routine use of GHS will also ensure compliance with a global system which contributes to increasing the competitiveness of the business. Products labelled in compliance with this system are more likely to be accepted by national regulatory agencies, which might otherwise use labelling requirements as effective non-tariff barriers. Additionally employers who implement this system stand to benefit from a healthier and therefore happier workforce, sensitized to the need to carefully read and follow instructions related to all chemicals both at and away from work. This is an invaluable benefit, as health and happiness are known indicators of a more productive workforce and productivity improvements contribute to an improved bottom line.

The first step in the implementation process is increasing the awareness of the best practices related to the proper management of chemicals; the Environmental Protection Department is the agency responsible for the distribution of information, currently in the form of posters and flyers which inform business owners and workers alike of the GHS. As employers prepare for the proclamation of the Safety & Health at Work Act on or before January 1, 2013, they will be well advised to secure a few of these posters from the Environmental Protection Department and display them prominently in the workplace along with other important safety & health related signage.

The use of appropriate signage is a key element in a sound hazard communication system, which is a critical part of an effective health and safety management system. Signage communicates the hazards present to workers and visitors to your premises, as well as the steps necessary to reduce or eliminate any risks associated with the hazard. In conjunction with regular training this allows employees to be aware of the correct procedures to follow in order to maintain a safe and healthy working environment.

Over the next several months, the BEC in conjunction with other social partners and wider civil society will be offering a number of training opportunities for employers and their employees ,the first of which will be on November 21st, to enhance the chances of successful implementation of the GHS and a painless transition from the soon to be repealed Factories Act to the much more contemporary Safety & Health at Work Act.