

The logo for Gas International, featuring the letters 'GI' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font on a black background.

GAS INTERNATIONAL

SEPTEMBER 2018

NEWS

Government gives last-minute go-ahead to UK fracking site

Traders brace for UK's possible exit from EU emissions market

Ofgem confirms five-year price control for RII02

A high-angle, low-perspective shot of two sleek, dark-colored sports cars driving on a road. The scene is bathed in a strong blue light, creating a futuristic and high-tech atmosphere. The lead car is in the foreground, angled towards the viewer, while a second car follows behind it. The background shows a blurred landscape under a dramatic, cloudy sky.

GAS IN THE TANK

The role our networks will play in the electric revolution

The logo for the Institution of Gas Engineers & Managers (IGEM), featuring a stylized flame icon to the left of the acronym 'IGEM' in a bold, sans-serif font. Below the acronym, the full name 'Institution of Gas Engineers & Managers' is written in a smaller font.

IGEM
Institution of Gas Engineers & Managers

FIGHTING THE SILENT KILLER



Stephanie Trotter OBE, President and Director of CO-Gas Safety, tells the story of more than two decades spent on the front line of the war against carbon monoxide poisoning

I became involved in carbon monoxide (CO) and gas safety after my son was injured at a children's activity holiday centre and four other teenagers drowned at such a facility in Lyme Bay.

I led a successful campaign to license these centres, during which I was introduced to a mother called Molly Maher, who was campaigning for safer holidays. She had lost her son Gary to CO while on a family break in Tenerife in 1985, an incident which also left her daughter Sheree disabled and a wheelchair user. Molly helped with our licensing campaign and subsequently CO-Gas Safety, the Carbon Monoxide & Gas Safety Society, was launched in 1995.

I have run this independently-

registered charity, helped by our voluntary directors and trustees, most of them victims of CO themselves, ever since.

PREVENTION IS A TOP PRIORITY

The prevention of deaths and injuries from unintentional carbon monoxide and other gas dangers was, and still is, our top priority. As a barrister, practicable legislative changes seem an obvious step to me.

Few industry members would talk to us in 1995, but victims and their families were keen to tell us their stories and to suggest how deaths and injuries could be prevented in future. Their goodwill and usually excellent ideas amazed us. Common

denominators emerged. We started running these ideas past gas experts in order to formulate practical changes. Within weeks, raising awareness of the hidden dangers of CO seemed the obvious way forward.

Less than two per cent of CO in the air can kill in as short as one minute, yet our human senses are powerless to detect it. In 1995, prime time TV warnings were a logical step, whereas these days the focus is more on social media (although we'd still like to do both). Our latest contribution, *One Survivor's Story*, cost just £400 to make and can be viewed at our website.

In 2000, the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) (now the Health and Safety Executive), recommended a levy on gas suppliers to pay for public awareness and research. In the 1990s, we suggested £1 per household, per year. We would have preferred a levy on the whole fuel industry, but admittedly gas suppliers were easier to reach through Ofgem. Sadly, this



levy was never implemented.

Lack of awareness is still a problem. We are very glad that the gas distribution networks (GDNs) have taken over our CO awareness competition in primary schools. However, so far no organisation has taken up our idea of a national PR campaign warning of the dangers of CO, much to our disappointment. In May this year, Audrey Gallacher, Director of Policy at Energy UK, attended a meeting between us and Npower, which was positive, but is

yet to yield any results.

The second 'no brainer' is appliance testing for CO by the gas emergency service and our patron, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, agrees. We would ask that if the source of CO cannot be identified, how can anyone be made safe? We've shown the industry examples in which suspected (but ultimately safe) appliances have been cut off, while clean-looking appliances have been left emitting CO. Since then, the gas emergency service generally cuts off entire households, which with

regard to CO is an improvement.

However, CO may still be emitted from neighbouring properties or solid fuel appliances. The gas emergency service generally does try to check neighbouring properties but we feel testing and monitoring with CO alarms would be best.

In 2000, the HSC recommended that the gas emergency service carry CO testing equipment in order to identify dangerous appliances. Unfortunately, this advice has been ignored. These days, first call operators (FCOs) wear personal alarm monitors (PAMs) for CO, which protect them. However, these do not help customers who are always told to turn off the appliance, open windows and get out, meaning that by the time the FCO enters, the CO will nearly always have disappeared.

Proof is a huge problem for victims. CO dissipates quickly in a live body and, without proof of poisoning, medics often wrongly diagnose other

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conditions, providing treatments that may do more harm than good and which waste NHS resources. The HSE rarely undertakes an investigation unless there is a death.

Experience has shown us just how confusing it can be to be exposed to CO. CO can affect a person's higher intellectual functions and victims are often unable to secure the scene to prevent changes to the evidence, especially if they are renting the property. Even where the evidence is preserved, I cannot recall a single victim who knew how to find a gas expert who could investigate and report as an independent court witness. While solicitors advise instructing these experts, investigations can easily cost around £8,000.

Without proof, there is no case. Without cases, both the government and industry can say there isn't a CO problem, or, if there is, that it is small. In fact, the problem could be huge. Most agree the actual figures and costs are far higher than the oft-stated 40 deaths and 4,000 A&E admittances per year, at a cost of £178 million a year. We simply don't know the scale of the problem because, despite 3,500 unexplained deaths every year, the UK carries out no automatic testing of dead bodies for CO.

In the absence of any easily obtained data about CO from all fuels, we have compiled our own from talking to victims and their families, from newspaper reports and any other sources we can access.

When we started, the numbers from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) did not seem to differentiate between CO from house fires and CO from appliances. Data has since improved, but to compare our data with that of the ONS, we need the name of the deceased, the date of death and the place of death. So far, we have been told that the names cannot be released, although every CO death has a public inquest. We are still working on this.

We obtain a huge amount of detail from families. For example, following the death of 11-year-old Katie Overton in 2003, we discovered that either a test of the flue gases, a service of the appliance, or a CO alarm fitted to EN 50291 would have saved her life. We were therefore supportive of MP

Eddie Hughes' private member's bill to make CO alarms mandatory in all rented properties and new builds.

We also want the law clarified or changed to insist on a service or a test of the flue gases rather than a simple gas safety check without equipment. I have advocated for this proposal in the past, which I maintain should also include a check on the CO alarm every 12 months.

Thankfully, we've received a lot of support for this, including from IGEM, for which we are very grateful. However, Mr Hughes has since withdrawn his bill because the issue has been referred for review by the All Party Group on Carbon Monoxide



(APPCOG). While we appreciate APPCOG should of course contribute, we are concerned the issue is not being dealt with by HSE. After all, most registered gas engineers use flue gas analysers and, obviously, you cannot guarantee safety from CO merely by looking at a gas appliance. We fear the 'review' may be an excuse to delay.

In an era where counselling is king, the only form of victim support regarding CO in the UK seems to be provided by me, a volunteer. It is my hope that one day a larger organisation, such as Gas Safe Charity or Gas Safety Trust, will be able to provide properly-funded and much needed support. We would also like to see greater leadership from organisations such as IGEM on this issue.

In May, the International Carbon Monoxide Research Network (ICORN) was launched by Gas Safety Trust at the House of Lords. Apart from CO

researcher Roland Wessling, himself a victim of carbon monoxide poisoning, no victims or victim groups were invited.

CO is a worldwide problem that should be of concern to governments, industry and consumers. I recently asked the GDNs to contact the United Nations about the danger of CO in refugee camps. There is even some research pointing to CO as a cause of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. For this reason, I believe we need all stakeholders to learn the lessons of the past, consider practical issues and make improvements. Victims are a valuable research resource in this effort, so they too need to be involved.

Our data compiled so far may only be the tip of iceberg. So far we've found that solid fuel causes more unintentional CO deaths per user than gas. Yet solid fuel installers do not have to be registered by law, as gas installers do.

Gas is much cleaner than most other fuels. Other sources of energy are coming, but gas still has a future. I appeal to readers to support a change to the law to make registration of all installers of appliances powered by carbon-based fuels compulsory. I also appeal to members of IGEM and other members of the fuel industry to provide proper funding for what this charity does. ■

■ **Email your questions and comments to office@co-gassafety.co.uk or visit www.co-gassafety.co.uk for more information**

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