

CO-Gas Safety Unintentional Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Case Study

ANNE BRENNAN, Deceased in 1995



Anne Brennan

Age: 20

Fuel: Mains gas

Appliance & Location: Central heating boiler in a student house

Notes by CO-Gas Safety: Anne's death was the catalyst that caused CO-Gas Safety to recommend that the public only buy and install CO detectors with audible alarms to British Standard, later EN 50291. At the time, disposable detector indicators that changed colour when exposed to CO (black spot detectors) were in wider use. These seemed cheaper, but weren't over a longer period, and obviously couldn't rouse victims from sleep or a CO-induced stupor.

Anne was living with about six other students in a house in Flass Street in Durham. In 1995 she was in her second year of study of English literature.

As of 1994 landlords were required to have gas appliances checked every 12 months by a registered engineer. The residents of Anne's house had suspected carbon monoxide and had purchased a 'black spot detector'. If only they had instead purchased a CO alarm to what was then British Standard, Anne would still be alive. However, CO alarms cost £30 to £60 at the time, which was a great deal more in real terms at the time.

House occupants aware of dangers of CO

There had been some work done in the area where Anne was living, such as condemning gas fires in older student properties. The students were therefore aware of carbon monoxide and had asked the landlord for ventilation. He had seemed angry about this request and came to the house with a drill and said, 'You want ventilation, well I'll give you ventilation' and drilled many holes in the back door.

Anne not the only victim

On the 15th November 1995 a female student in the house fainted and had been taken to hospital. Doctors suggested that carbon monoxide could be responsible. The other housemates later realised that they hadn't seen Anne all day so her friends broke into her bedroom and found her on her bed. Paramedics arrived very quickly and tried to resuscitate Anne for about three quarters of an hour but were unsuccessful. Anne's room was over the boiler location in the kitchen, which explained why she died but her fellow students survived.

Such a loss

Anne wanted to become a Labour party MP. She even had red hair like Barbara Castle, the prominent northern Labour MP and cabinet minister. Anne's teachers described her as highly intelligent and motivated, and extremely popular. Friends said she was very happy, helpful, always smiling and loved being at college.

Margaret Brennan, Anne's mother says, 'the last time I saw Anne she said, I love you mother, take care of yourself and I'll see you at the weekend'.

Hugh Brennan, Anne's father says, 'When I took Anne back to the student house and went into her room I said, 'I'll open this window here Anne and let some fresh air in.' Anne said, 'Oh no, I like to keep warm'.

CO-Gas Safety's role

CO-Gas Safety couldn't do a great deal for the Brennan family in the aftermath of Anne's death, but we did advise them that they should consider instructing a lawyer for the inquest. Stephanie attended the inquest in Durham and met the police officer in charge, Steve Kitchin. He was very helpful and when Sonja Hyams, another student, died from CO a year later in November 1996, Steve kindly helped the police and the proceedings went more easily. Thankfully we haven't had another university student death since 1996, which is real progress.

At the inquest, Margaret was kind enough to thank Stephanie for her advice to instruct a lawyer.

Prosecutions by Health & Safety Executive

In 1997 a landlord, Graham Williams, and a gas fitter, Edgar Maddison, were fined £10,000 and £3,500, respectively (plus £2,000 costs each) by Newcastle Crown Court. The judge said that he would have sent them to jail if he had had the power. The inquest returned a verdict of unlawful killing.

Anne's parents recovered no damages for Anne's death because there are no damages for death itself in English law. There are limited damages for bereavement (£12,980) but these are only for a child not yet 18 or for a spouse. Anne was 20 and not married.

Anne's death prompted the Northern Echo newspaper to start a valuable campaign against the 'silent killer'.

Tony Blair, then Labour MP and Leader of the Opposition, sent a letter to Anne's housemates dated 12th December 1995 in which he expressed his sorrow and sympathy. He wrote that 'Everything must be done to help this tragic accident from ever happening again'.

Parliamentary debate

The family's MP at the time of the inquest, Fraser Kemp, said the following in Parliament:

(see <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1998/jan/21/carbon-monoxide-poisoning>)

HC Deb 21 January 1998 vol 304 cc972-9

'I had the privilege of meeting the parents of Anne Brennan recently, and spoke to them yesterday to talk about the issue and about my raising my concerns in the House. I beg the indulgence of the House while I read from a letter they sent me, and I ask the House to listen carefully: We were obviously saddened and devastated by the death of our daughter Anne. She was a gifted girl who had vitality and a great love of life, she was a talented singer and artist, she helped underprivileged children in the north-east. Apparently her real ambition, declared in writing, was to become a Member of Parliament.

The letter continues: We know nothing can replace Anne and our lives were torn apart with her passing. What we are determined to do is help prevent other families having to suffer a similar loss. We urge the government to do anything it can to ensure her death was not in vain. Although Anne's parents have had to cope with that tragedy, they still want to see some good come out of it, so that she will not have died in vain.

I must tell the Minister that I realise that there are no easy answers and no quick fixes. None the less, we must realise that there is a real problem. The CO-Gas Safety charity, to whose work I pay tribute, estimates that, between September 1995 and November 1997, about 134 deaths resulted from carbon monoxide poisoning, as well as about 800 near misses.'

Having made the point that the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning can also arise from coal, wood and fuels other than gas, he went on to say:

'Following the denationalisation of British Gas, the position of that company and of Transco should be examined, and the major gas companies need to exercise greater responsibility. All gas users pay a standing charge of £32.92 a year, and a small proportion of that could go towards trying to solve the problem.

I am reliably informed by the carbon monoxide safety campaign that Transco, one of the British Gas businesses, has no equipment for tracing carbon monoxide. That is a bit like asking someone to investigate radioactivity without supplying a Geiger counter. We need to think about the support that gas companies have.'

CO-Gas Safety comments

We wish we could report that things have changed radically since Anne died in 1995. A rented house such as hers would now require a landlord's Gas Safety Check & certificate but that does not necessarily require a test of the flue gasses. Sadly, Anne's landlord still would not be obliged to install a CO alarm as the law stands in England on 20.01.20. The gas emergency service is still not required by law to carry and use equipment to test gas appliances for CO. Anne and her housemates were all concerned about CO but raising the issue with their landlord brought an inadequate response. Today, many tenants are too intimidated to even raise such issues with their landlords but might find it easier to contact the gas emergency service, as an independent body. However, as the law stands on 20.01.20, the students still wouldn't be able to request a mandatory test of the flue gasses by the gas emergency service; calling them now would probably simply result in them cutting off the gas supply, leading to even more difficulties with their landlord & no resolution or proof of CO.

There are now four companies, the Gas Distribution Networks (GDNs), that provide the gas emergency service and operate in different areas of the country: Cadent (West Midlands, North West England, East of England & North London), Wales & West Utilities (Wales and South West England), Northern Gas Networks (North East England) and SGN (Scotland and Southern England including South London).

The GDNs have thankfully taken over CO-Gas Safety's CO awareness competition and made this a great success.



*Anne Brennan on the left and her friend, Rachel Hastie, on the right.
Rachel was a big help to CO-Gas Safety and to Anne's parents, Hugh and Margaret Brennan.*