

CO-Gas Safety Unintentional Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Case Study

JANET BLOUNT, Survived in 1999



Age: 43

Fuel: Mains gas

Appliance & Location: Boiler at her work office

Notes by CO-Gas Safety: This case study is written by Janet and shows that exposure can easily go unnoticed on a daily basis. CO poisoning can also have delayed and serious ongoing symptoms. Janet's colleagues, though annoyed at the inconvenience that her complaints caused at the time, are lucky that she persisted in identifying the boiler as an immediate danger.

Janet Blount

I was educated to CSE level. I passed all my exams and got Grade 1 in Typing, hence my chosen career as a secretary. I began in 1972 at Frizzell in the Post Room and worked my way through to Secretary to the Head of Underwriting. In 1983 I left to have my first child. Just over two years later I had my second child, but didn't return to work until my eldest was 6 years old (1989). It was then that I joined the Health Screening Company as a secretary.

My office was on the 2nd floor, in the roof. I had a desk next to a cupboard, with louvre doors, which contained the office boiler. I worked Mon-Fri, 9am - 1pm.

Approximately 1999

Around ten years after I started work there, over a period of time (I'm not sure how long, maybe a few weeks), I started to feel unwell. I would turn up to work feeling ok but as the morning went on I would start to feel nauseous, get a headache and by the time I left could hardly keep my eyes open. I would drive home (about 25 mins) with the windows of the car open to keep me awake. Sometimes I would need to go to bed when I got in, setting an alarm so that I would be awake for when my daughter came home from school. As the day progressed, I would start to feel better and have more energy.

This continued on day after day. I asked at work if we could have the boiler serviced, to be told that it had already been serviced. In the afternoon we had a typist who worked in the same office and, at first, she seemed ok. The boiler went off for most of the time that she was working and would come on again late afternoon. On chatting to her one day, she said that she was going home with a headache most days.

Investigation of the boiler

At this point I started to think it was definitely something to do with the boiler. When I got to work the next day the usual nausea started and I decided to call the Gas Board to come and check the boiler. They duly came and basically condemned it. The engineer shut it down and said it was not to be used until it had been checked over.

It turned out that the flue was blocked with falling leaves and therefore it was belching CO down into my office, through the boiler cupboard's louvre doors. I was not too popular that day, as the doctors' surgery had to be closed because they couldn't stay open without hot water.

Diagnosis and effects

I went home and am pretty sure I saw my GP the same day. She checked me over and said that I needed to be in the fresh air as much as possible in the following days and that I would gradually start to feel better. I mentioned the CO to her as I told her about the boiler. No blood or breath tests were carried out to confirm CO exposure or assess the level of possible poisoning. We were going to Centre Parcs that weekend with family for a holiday, so thought that would be an ideal way for me to be out in the fresh air. As it turned out we were to go everywhere on the site by bicycle and it was quite a hilly site. I was so weak I couldn't keep up with the family and my husband had to push my bike up the hills for me because I couldn't cycle up them and didn't have the energy to push the bike either. I had lost weight over the previous weeks, because I felt so nauseous all the time.

Returning to work

I was bothered about returning to work, to the same office, after this. My husband phoned the surgery to say that he thought I would return if they moved my office. This was duly done, the problem was fixed and I returned to work. I was paranoid after this and went out and bought the small spot CO detectors and put them everywhere. I issued my family with them and became quite annoying, wanting everyone to be aware of CO. To a certain degree I am still very aware. At the time I am not sure I was aware there were CO alarms. I know how lucky I was.

Later diagnosis of long-term symptoms

In 2009 I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I was given the diagnosis in October of that year, but I first went to the doctor in June/July 2009 and went through a series of tests. These were mostly blood tests, which included thyroid, full blood count, B12, rheumatoid screening etc. I also had an ECG. All results came back normal. A medical professional I knew socially recommended that I see Dr Selwyn Richards, who is a Rheumatology Consultant with an interest in Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. My GP referred me and Dr Richards gave me a thorough examination and consultation, and said he thought I would benefit from a 13-week course at Wareham Hospital. I attended this and found it extremely helpful. It basically explained some of my symptoms and gave me strategies to cope on a daily basis and recommended resting/activity to allow me to build my strength back up.

Failed by the benefit system

This resulted in me giving up work as I couldn't cope. I didn't have the strength to fight the system to receive state benefit payments; when having a medical they said that they couldn't see much wrong with me, which outwardly I admit there didn't appear to be. I was asked to do a series of things, ie pick up a pen from the floor, touch my toes, etc and, if I remember correctly, had to get 15 points to get the benefit. I scored 0 points. As a result, we decided to downsize our house and pay off the mortgage, which enabled me to give up work and I have never gone back.

I also have borderline B12 deficiency. I try to take a daily B vitamin, which includes B12, to keep on top of this. I have in the past had three B12 injections when my level dipped below the recommended limit. I'm not sure if this is relevant as I think the B12 deficiency existed before the CO incident, but I am now aware that B12 is being suggested as a treatment for some CO poisoning survivors. Thankfully my symptoms have eased over time but I will never know the extent of my exposure to carbon monoxide poisoning or whether it was linked to my subsequent chronic fatigue.

Janet Blount