

CO-Gas Safety Unintentional Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Case Study

KATIE OVERTON, Deceased in 2003



Emma, Sian & Katie (L to R)

Age: 11

Fuel: Mains gas

Appliance & Location: Central heating boiler in her rented home

Notes by CO-Gas Safety: The 2018 CO-Gas Safety press pack included Katie's story told by her father, Paul Overton, who has been a trustee and director of CO-Gas Safety since 2005.

In 2019 her sister Sian wanted to provide us with an account of the impact Katie's death had on her and her family, and also support our call for changes to the Gas Safety Regulations. We are very grateful to her for this personal account.

When I was 7 years old, my sister Katie died of carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning at 11 years old. Katie was a kind, bubbly and caring girl, who had her life snatched away from her.

Katie was killed during the night by carbon monoxide poisoning because our boiler was not serviced regularly and the carbon monoxide leaked into her room. I remember playing with my toys under my bed and hearing my dad shout "CALL 999". I then went downstairs and then the paramedics took Katie down the stairs on a stretcher. Then I went into Katie's room and saw blood on her bed. The next time I saw her she was in a white coffin at the morgue.

Devastating loss

When I was 7, I had many nightmares after Katie's death and thought I was going to die. Then when I grew older I suffered with OCD, anxiety and depression, at one point I had suicidal thoughts. I have problems with my long-term and short-term memory because of being poisoned by carbon monoxide. Katie's death has had a big impact on our family. We miss Katie every single day and life does not feel complete without her. We are not the same happy family as we used to be because Katie is missing. We have all suffered after Katie's death in many ways, especially with grief.

Before Katie's death we didn't know anything about CO; we didn't even know it existed.

Katie's death could have been avoided if an audible carbon monoxide alarm had been fitted.

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7301498/gas-safety-week-parents-tragic-girl/>

The law on CO alarms should cover more properties

The current law in England is that landlords only need to install a carbon monoxide alarm if the house has an appliance that burns solid fuel such as coal, wood and charcoal. Landlords do not have to install a carbon monoxide alarm if the appliances burn fuel such as gas, paraffin, oil and LPG even though any of these can emit carbon monoxide.

If you are in an adjoining property or block of flats, you could still get carbon monoxide poisoning even if you do not burn any fuel because carbon monoxide can seep through the brickwork or perhaps through a joint chimney or attic.

It is worth bearing in mind that less than 2% of CO in the air can kill in between one and three minutes. See Para 74 table 23 page 26 of the following:

https://www.hse.gov.uk/foi/internalops/hid_circs/technical_osd/spc_tech_osd_30/spctecosd30.pdf

A Gas Safety Check is not enough year after year

If the gas boiler had been serviced regularly this would have prevented Katie's death. Landlords are required by law to keep the gas appliances they own in a safe condition. Landlords are also required by law to arrange for a Gas Safety Check and certificate every year. The problem is that landlords can be confused and think that a Gas Safety Check and certificate is all that is needed, whereas obviously every few years a gas appliance needs a proper and full service. The service costs more than a simple check. It would surely be easier and safer if landlords were simply required to have their gas appliances either serviced or their emissions tested for carbon monoxide every year. Merely testing the emissions is often what British Gas does when it provides a service. If the emissions are within a safety range, there is no need to strip down the boiler and clean out any soot etc. Indeed, it is perhaps better not to if there is no need because even registered gas engineers have been known to fail to put the boiler parts back together correctly.

The investigation into Katie's death found that our boiler needed a very good clean and service. The registered gas installer wanted to service it but the landlord kept asking for a Gas Safety Certificate. Sensibly, the registered gas installer refused to provide this certificate knowing a service was badly needed. Katie paid for this misunderstanding (or meanness on the part of the landlord) with her life. With the risk being so high it would surely be better to make sure everything is done to prevent CO emissions, as well as having the CO alarm just in case something unexpected happens (e.g. a bird's nest falls down a chimney or flue).

The laws on gas safety need small, achievable changes

Stephanie Trotter has proposed changes to the law on landlords' Gas Safety Checks, certificates and CO alarms. She has published an article about this in the New Law Journal 28.03.18 & Gi magazine, September 2018 (see also <https://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/about-co/suggested-changes/>). CO-Gas Safety has support for these changes from the Pimlico Plumbers (Charlie Mullins), The Dominic Rodgers Trust (Stacey Rodgers), The Katie Haines Memorial Trust (Gordon & Avril Samuel), Holiday Travel Watch (Frank Brehany, Consumer Champion), the National Landlords' Association (Richard Price & Clive Norris), The Gas Industry Safety Group (Chris Bielby), the Gas Safety Trust (Chris Bielby), The All Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group (Dr Ben Klos) and IGEM (Ian McCluskey).

So why hasn't the government agreed to these sensible changes?

The symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are:-

- headaches
- dizziness
- nausea
- breathlessness
- collapsing
- loss of consciousness.

Also, if your pet is ill or wants to go out a lot, there could be a low level of CO in your house.

I am sharing this in order to raise awareness, because people are still dying and suffering permanent injury from carbon monoxide poisoning. Hopefully by sharing this I will help to save at least one life.

CO alarms need to be audible and comply with EN 50291. It is also wise to buy them direct from a reputable supplier and not from the internet. See <https://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/about-co/alarms/>

A video version of my family's experience is available here: <https://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/sian-overton-makes-a-film-about-her-older-sister-katie-dying-of-co/>

Sian Overton, Katie's younger sister