

## CO-Gas Safety Unintentional Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Case Study

### **KATIE OVERTON, Deceased in 2003**



*Katie Overton*

**Age:** 11

**Fuel:** Mains gas

**Appliance & Location:** Central heating boiler in her home

**Notes by CO-Gas Safety:** This description of the incident that resulted in the death of Katie Overton, and the weeks following it, was told to Stephanie Trotter of CO-Gas Safety by Katie's stepfather, Paul. All of the Overton family could so easily have been killed by CO, as they returned to their rented home without knowing the boiler had been the cause of Katie's death. This case validates the simple measures that CO-Gas Safety are still campaigning for to prevent future tragedies.

I am Paul Overton, stepfather of Katie Overton, who died at the age of 11½ years due to carbon monoxide poisoning at 7 Oxford Road, Southsea, Portsmouth PO5 1NP, a privately rented property, March 29<sup>th</sup> 2003. Although I was her stepfather I always considered her one of my own children and treated her and loved her exactly the same as my other children.

#### **A description of the incident**

- 1** I discovered Katie not breathing at about 10.00 a.m. on her bed.
- 2** Phoned for an ambulance. I attempted resuscitation but to no avail.
- 3** Katie was taken to hospital, my wife and I travelled up with her.
- 4** The hospital staff informed us after about 20 mins that Katie was dead.
- 5** A post mortem could not establish the cause of death.
- 6** Myself and my wife were under suspicion of murder for the next 10 days.
- 7** Ten days after Katie's death I awoke with a banging headache and felt very dizzy, as did my wife and other two daughters - one aged 7 years 3mths and the other who had just turned 6 years old
- 8** The house smelt as if somebody had left a car running in it. The smell seemed to be coming from the gas boiler.
- 9** We opened all windows and doors. I contacted the letting agent and they sent out a CORGI gas engineer. The engineer tested for carbon monoxide by setting the heating running and placing an ambient air CO detector in the house. He then came outside. After 15 minutes he ran back in, grabbed the detector and ran back out. The detector recorded a reading of 12,795 parts per million (PPM) of carbon monoxide in the house. The engineer was amazed any of us were alive as the carbon monoxide level was lethal.
- 10** I contacted the police dealing with our case and explained about the carbon monoxide reading and that the gas engineer thought this may be the cause of Katie's death.
- 11** The police contacted British Gas and an investigative team were sent out to our address. They confirmed the CO readings. By this stage Katie had been cremated.

**12** Katie's blood samples were now tested for carbon monoxide and it was confirmed that this was the cause of death.

**13** At no time were we advised to get checked for carbon monoxide exposure by the CORGI engineer, British Gas investigative team, the police, the hospital or even the people who tested Katie's blood. These were the pathologists.

**14** When British Gas investigated it was established that the boiler had not been serviced for at least 3 years but did have safety checks. The Gas Safety Check was due on March 28 2003 but was postponed til April by the Landlord.

**15** Therefore the Gas Safety Certificate had run out the day before Katie's death. I think the registered gas installer who carried out the safety checks wanted to service the gas boiler but the landlord thought this unnecessary and that only a safety check was required by law.

**16** When the boiler was cleaned by the investigative team the carbon monoxide level dropped to 2 ppm, proving if servicing had taken place Katie would not have died.

**17** I found CO-Gas Safety on the last page (inside cover) of the HSE bereavement leaflet and contacted Stephanie Trotter. Stephanie told me it had taken years of persuasion for HSE to put CO-Gas Safety on the leaflet. Later I became a trustee. I have since learned that the leaflet has been discontinued and that although the charity is on the HSE website, it is very difficult to find.

Why is there so little help for victims?

*Paul Overton*

### **CO-Gas Safety comments**

The charity is extremely grateful to Paul Overton for his permission to document his family's experience in this way, and for his contribution to CO-Gas Safety as a trustee. His experience highlights a number of issues that we have been trying to address for many years now and is a good example of how much can be learned from working with survivors.

- CO-Gas Safety are still the only organisation that we know of which provides support and advice to victims of unintentional carbon monoxide poisoning. We receive no funding from either Government or any of the fuel industry bodies. The Overton family were given no advice about the risk to their own health following the discovery of CO at their home. Although we believe that the emergency services would give better advice now, it is also true that many medical professionals are still ill-informed or dismissive of victims who present with CO symptoms.
- This case, among others, shows the need to test for CO in cases of unexplained death for the sake of others living in the house. We believe that doing this would also reveal far more cases of unintentional CO poisoning than are currently documented. Around 3,500 people between the ages of 16 and 64 die of unexplained death in the UK every year and are not tested for CO according to Dr Mary Shepherd, who receives the hearts of people whose deaths are unexplained. Please see <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mq18424765-600-the-killer-with-no-name/>. Carrying out blood tests as part of *all* Post Mortems is one of the measures we have been calling for for many years now. The Gas Safety Trust has funded a pilot which originally sought to develop a protocol to test all dead bodies for CO. This started in early 2016 and has not yet been published. As at Jan 2020, the report is being reviewed and will be published in the near

future. There have been issues which have caused significant delays primarily due to the need to reflect and capitalise on recent legislative changes. Gas Safety Trust - [GST@electralink.co.uk](mailto:GST@electralink.co.uk)

- The property had no CO alarm or detector, and current legislation in England would still not require one, as the appliance was powered by mains gas and not solid fuel (privately-rented properties in England are only required to have a CO alarm to EN50291 standard in rooms containing a solid fuel appliance. The devolved nations have different legislation, currently too complicated to summarise here). This meant that the family were still unaware that they were at fatal risk when they returned to the property after Katie's death.
- The Overton's landlord was prosecuted for the lack of a Gas Safety Certificate but did he really understand the need for a service in order to keep the gas appliance in a safe condition? The landlord seemed to put pressure on the Gas Safe registered installer to provide a Gas Safety Certificate, while the Gas Safe registered engineer tried hard to persuade the landlord to undertake a service. The landlord was fined £42,000 plus £18,000 costs. **Were either of them really aware of how dangerous CO is or the difference to safety that a service would make?**

As long ago as 2010, CO-Gas Safety drafted a clarification/change in the law to address this last issue. We wish to amend the Gas Regulations to require a landlord to have either a service of the gas appliances undertaken by a Registered Gas Installer using equipment capable of testing for CO, or at least a test for CO included as part of the Gas Safety Certificate. This can be found under item 15 at <http://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/about-co/suggested-changes/>.

This clarification/change has support from Pimlico Plumbers, the Dominic Rodgers Trust, Katie Haines Memorial Trust, Holiday Travel Watch, the National Landlords' Association, The Gas Industry Safety Group, the Gas Safety Trust, the All Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group (APPCOG) and IGEM.

Please note that British Gas refuses to undertake Gas Safety Checks without a contract to service as well, which we think is right and produces the effect we want enshrined in the Regulations.

This account by Paul Overton was first published in our 2018 Press Pack. Our 2019 Press Pack included a description of the impact of Katie's death on the family, written by her younger sister, Sian, which is now available on our website.

A video version of the family's experience is also available here:

<https://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/sian-overton-makes-a-film-about-her-older-sister-katie-dying-of-co/>



Also see: [www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/5644895.landlord-fined-after-gas-leak-kills-11-year-old-girl/](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/5644895.landlord-fined-after-gas-leak-kills-11-year-old-girl/)