

CO-Gas Safety Unintentional Carbon Monoxide Poisoning Case Study

SUE WESTWOOD, Long-term exposure in 2003-6



Age: 33

Fuel: Mains gas

Appliance & Location: Central heating boiler in her new home

Notes by CO-Gas Safety: Sue has tried to raise awareness of unintentional CO poisoning through the press by recounting her experience of undiagnosed long-term symptoms. Despite two hospital stays and multiple GP visits for herself and her young son, the cause of her many debilitating conditions (including complete collapse) was discovered by chance during a routine boiler check.

Sue and her son Josh

I was aged 30 and had one child, Josh (aged 6), when I moved into a newly-built house. I was very fit, went to the gym regularly and rode my horse 3 or 4 times a week. I also ran my own business in construction (insurance repair).

Collapse lead to hospital care but not diagnosis

Then gradually I started to feel unwell, which got worse and worse. Finally, in the Autumn of 2006, I collapsed at my front door. What I didn't realise at the time is how near to death I actually was; my major organs were shutting down, starved of vital oxygen. I regained consciousness long enough to call 999. I thought I was having a heart attack. Josh was at school. Paul, my husband, was at work so I was on my own.

After a week on the cardiac ward at Wythenshawe hospital, having multiple examinations, ECGs, x-rays and blood tests, and several consultants asking if I had taken cocaine, as my symptoms were scarily similar, I was discharged. I was horrified at being suspected of taking cocaine. I never take drugs of any kind. The pain in my chest and my arm was still radiating as I left the hospital so I was convinced I was having a heart attack. The medics were baffled.

Almost immediate recurrence

At home two days later I had severe chest pains, and couldn't breathe. The ambulance was called. Once again the tests came back inconclusive, I was sent home.

By coincidence, the warranty for the boiler in our 3-year-old house was coming to the end. The engineer came out to do a routine maintenance check on the boiler so we could put it on a contract with British Gas. The first test he did was to check for carbon monoxide poisoning. I'll never forget the look on his face when he told me to get out of the house immediately. The boiler was leaking dangerous levels of carbon monoxide. We had a CO alarm fitted.

Poisoned both day and night

My family had been so close to death and in fact the only reason we didn't all die is we had the windows open all the time. Investigations found the flue wasn't connected under the built-in wardrobes in the master bedroom and the connectors in the boiler cupboard, which were one metre from my office and Josh's bedroom, were the wrong ones, so CO was leaking from there as well. I was being poisoned during the day in my office then at night in my bed.

Over the three years we had lived in our house, I had suffered headaches, dizziness, lack of concentration and flu-like symptoms. Josh had recurrent stomach ache. I took him for a check-up at

the doctors, only to be told nothing was wrong with him and he was trying to get out of going to school! At no point did any of the medical profession test for or consider we could have carbon monoxide poisoning.

Devastating consequences continue years after exposure

I have suffered immensely from the poisoning. I have had to give up my business due to my brain injury; I now have vascular dementia, fibromyalgia, Tietzes Syndrome, Peripheral Neuropathy, Disequilibrium, debilitating migraines every few weeks, and memory, concentration and information retention issues. I've also had operations on both hands from the nerve damage, and have had to retrain myself to read because for 3 years I couldn't read more than a short paragraph of text.

Alarm saved us again the next year!

Ironically, 12 months after we found out about the leak, an alarm went off just outside my office door; the CO alarm was beeping. On further inspection the new flue that had been fitted was cracked - it was leaking CO again! If I hadn't got the alarm we might not have been so lucky second time around.

I always associated CO with old, badly-maintained student properties; I never imagined a brand new house could have nearly killed us all.

Sue Westwood



*Sue with her son Josh,
in more recent times*

CO-Gas Safety comment

The life-changing effects caused by the poor installation of Sue's boiler and its associated pipework in a brand new property was shocking and completely avoidable. It highlights the need for annual servicing and flue emissions checks by Gas Safe registered professionals, even for new installations.

Luckily, Sue fitted an alarm in 2006 and this may well have saved the lives of her and her family when a second fault created another leak so soon after their initial exposure. There is currently no requirement for new-builds to include a CO alarm to EN 50291 as standard.

Sue had no tests for CO poisoning, despite her symptoms hospitalising her twice. Nor did her GP recognise possible symptoms in Josh. The All Party Parliamentary Carbon Monoxide Group (APPCOG) now has a medical committee which, after several years, seems now to have good knowledge. However, where is the awareness PR campaign to properly alert medical professionals at all levels?

We have visited the Royal College of GPs several times and tried to persuade them to take CO seriously but with little progress. Sue has become a trustee of CO-Gas Safety and is a valuable member of our board. She has also made a one minute film about CO - see <https://www.co-gassafety.co.uk/one-survivors-story/> - paid for by CO-Gas Safety (cost around £400), which has been widely viewed and appreciated on social media. This film was shown at an APPCOG event but we have received no offers to show it on prime-time TV and as part of a general PR campaign by the industry or government. Why not?