

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

### JOHN & IRMA O'LEARY, Long-term exposure in 2003-4



*John O'Leary*

**Fuel:** Mains gas

**Appliance & Location:** Central heating boiler in their rented home

**Notes by CO-Gas Safety:** John O'Leary and his family suffered long-term low-level exposure to CO and other toxins over a period of time in 2003-4. CO-Gas Safety were able to help them by recommending a good lawyer and thankfully their case was successful. John, who is a writer and artist, has helped the charity hugely by illustrating for us several times. Irma has very kindly become a trustee. We are grateful to them for allowing us to recount their experience with both their landlord and the medical profession.

The family lived in rented accommodation managed by a TMO (tenant management organisation) in North London. The day-to-day running of the housing co-operative was managed by an employed member of staff overseen by a committee of tenants. It's the responsibility of the co-op to carry out the annual safety inspection of the boilers but in 2003, the year the leak occurred, the family's boiler was not inspected.

#### **Consequences emerge from lack of maintenance**

The one who was affected most was Irma, John's wife. John had some symptoms and, thankfully, the effect on the kids was minimal. Irma spent a lot of time in the area where the boiler is situated. The children were out a lot of the time and John was mainly working in a different part of the flat.

Irma was always more sensitive to allergens and gas but never had asthma previously and was generally in good health, as was the rest of the family.

Irma's health began to seriously deteriorate - she was suffering from severe headaches, nausea, and dizziness, blurry vision, swelling around the eyes, memory blanks, rashes, breathing problems - particularly at night which severely affected her sleep - and pain around the lungs. Her blood pressure was also fluctuating. She suffered from muscular cramps and, gradually, she lost her sense of smell.

#### **Realising the boiler could be the cause**

Irma gradually noticed that a lot of her symptoms lessened when she went outside. She mentioned it to a friend, who said she knew someone else who had similar symptoms that were caused by a faulty boiler. It was after this that Irma called the gas supplier and they sent someone to test the boiler. They clearly identified the leak, the boiler was closed down immediately and was replaced soon after. If it wasn't for Irma's friend who knew something about CO poisoning, they would never have guessed that was what it was.

There was no suspicion that Irma's deterioration could be anything else, they just had absolutely no idea what was making her so sick. She kept going to the doctors, who didn't pick up on it either. They kept treating her symptoms, often thinking she was suffering from flu. She was prescribed lots of antibiotics, steroids and inhalers, but obviously, none of these helped.

Once the boiler fault had been found, the family's emerging health problems and the timing of the leak went far beyond coincidence and an independent toxicologist subsequently attributed Irma's onset of asthma and other problems to CO poisoning.

### **Long-term effects on the family's health**

It took Irma about eight years to feel 80% better, but she will never return to 100% health. She still has difficulty breathing and will use inhalers for the rest of her life. It wasn't until about three years after that her memory loss was reversed. John recovered fairly quickly and the kids seemed fine.

The children weren't affected too much at the time - they seemed to be suffering from the flu a lot and were generally quite tired. Their youngest son, who was two and a half at the time, would sometimes just fall asleep if he was in the kitchen - John and Irma wonder if this was connected.

They do worry that there may have been long-term effects on their children. They have both had health issues (nothing major) but nothing that can be directly attributed to what happened.

### **What the family wish they had known**

At the time, there was less awareness of the dangers of CO. John and Irma strongly believe that if more information had been available – prime-time TV warnings, for example – a lot of their problems could have been avoided. Much more needs to be done to educate people and to increase awareness.

There are organizations out there. John and Irma got enormous help and support from the charity CO-Gas Safety at the time. In terms of advice, John says:

- Because the symptoms are so varied, it's very easy to misdiagnose. Being informed is crucial - as bad as the effects were for us, it can be much, much worse, resulting even in death.
- Make sure you have a CO alarm to EN 50291, bought directly from a reputable manufacturer, and not just for your home – get a portable one to take with you whenever you go away.
- Know the symptoms - dull headache, weakness, dizziness, nausea or vomiting, shortness of breath, confusion, blurred vision, loss of consciousness. The symptoms will lessen when you go outside, away from the source of the leak.
- CO can be produced by any faulty appliance that burns fuel so make sure appliances are properly installed and checked regularly. This includes portable devices in boats, caravans & mobile homes.
- If you suspect a leak, get out of the house immediately. Get the appliance checked immediately.
- Make sure your kids are aware of the danger, so that when they move out, go to university or go away on holiday with their friends, they know what to do to stay safe. Give them a CO alarm to take with them.
- Be aware that BBQs can be dangerous too, even after they're put out, so don't bring them inside tents. Also – wood pellets for fires can give off CO even when in storage. These need to be stored in sealed tanks or hoppers.
- Be aware that CO can also sometimes pass from property to property – so you can still be affected even if the leak is in the adjoining property.

### **CO-Gas Safety comment**

Unfortunately, even today doctors rarely think about CO as a possible cause of symptoms. We have tried to convince both government and the Royal College of GPs to do more to raise awareness, with little success.