

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 MONDAY 2 OCTOBER

E096:06

2 October 2006

LORD HUNT CALLS FOR RENEWED ACTION ON GAS SAFETY

At a gas safety stakeholder forum today, Monday 2 October, hosted by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Lord Hunt of Kings Heath will make clear that complacency on gas related carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is not an option.

Research commissioned from University College London by HSE to inform its gas safety review highlights the dangers of CO poisoning in people's homes, coupled with a lack of public awareness of the risks.

The early findings of the research include:

- 23% of homes had one or more defective gas appliance;
- 8% of homes were judged to be at risk of dangerous levels of CO;
- 45% of homes had received no information on the dangers of CO; and
- A higher prevalence of problem appliances was found in the homes of vulnerable people (young, old, those in receipt of benefits).

Opening the forum, Lord Hunt will call on the 100 plus delegates to do what is necessary to raise awareness. He will say:

'The early findings of this research show there is no room for complacency. It is simply not right for the current situation to continue. It is critical that people are made more aware of the risks of CO poisoning and how to avoid the dangers.

'It is essential that this lack of awareness is addressed. I call on gas safety stakeholders to work with HSE in this gas safety review to come up with a set a proposals that will put in place a modern and effective gas safety regime.'

Dr Ben Croxford, of University College London will present the emerging key findings from the 'Gas Appliance Check Project'. Nearly 600 homes in South East England were visited and a large survey of gas appliances was carried out over the summer of 2006.

The problems were mainly associated with the way homeowners and occupiers used the appliances and how they used available ventilation. This is an area that falls outside the Gas Safety Installation and Use Regulations 1998 that HSE enforces, and is why increasing CO awareness is so important. A problem gas appliance is a health risk that can be avoided with maintenance and awareness.

The Executive Summary from this research is attached to this release at Annex 1.

The Forum will also receive a presentation from 'Frontline', the consultants appointed to liaise with stakeholders and to develop a range of options for modernising the domestic gas safety regime. The Forum will encourage a full discussion on the options with the aim of agreeing the top priorities for action. Next steps in this process will be for the Health and Safety Commission to consider the options and agree recommendations to Ministers in the New Year.

Notes to Editors

1. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) is responsible for health and safety regulation in Great Britain. The Health and Safety Executive and local government are the enforcing authorities who work in support of the Commission. The HSC is sponsored by the Department of Work and Pensions and is ultimately accountable to Lord Hunt of Kings Heath OBE as Parliamentary Under Secretary (for Work and Pensions) (Lords). Lord Hunt's biographical details are at: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/ministers/hunt.asp>
2. Every year about 20-30 people die from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning associated with domestic gas appliances, due mainly to these appliances not having been properly installed or maintained. HSE enforces the Gas Safety Installation and Use Regulations 1998. These regulations place responsibilities on a wide range of people, including those installing, servicing, maintaining or repairing gas appliances and other gas fittings; as well as suppliers and users of gas systems/appliances. Statutory obligations are placed on landlords to maintain gas appliances that they own. But owner/occupiers do not have duties under these regulations to maintain or use their gas appliances safely.
3. An analysis of gas incidents over the eight years to 2003/04 shows that 64 per cent of fatalities were attributed to the action or lack of action of an occupier or a relative.
4. The law requires that anyone who works on gas appliances must be competent, and if they are doing the work as a business, i.e. employer or self-employed, they must be CORGI registered. HSE has prosecuted 130 people over the last four years for impersonating a CORGI registered installer or carrying out work while not registered.
5. The HSE review, announced on 15 February 2006 (see <http://www.hse.gov.uk/press/2006/e06014.htm>), builds on the HSC Fundamental Review of

Gas Safety in 2000. HSE recognises that time has moved on, particularly in the light of HSC's 'Strategy for Workplace Health and Safety in Great Britain to 2010 and beyond', published in February 2004.

6. As part of the Review, HSE commissioned research to examine the scale of CO problems in people's homes. Gas related fatalities and incidents reported to HSE have shown a downward trend and relatively few in the context of the usage of domestic gas. But there is concern among some stakeholders that this might represent under-reporting, due to possible misdiagnosis of illness and wrongful determination of cause of death. The research is aimed at clarifying the actual level of risk arising from CO and faulty gas appliances. Emerging findings of the research will be presented at the forum today by the report's author, Dr Ben Croxford of University College London to inform discussion on the Review options and the way forward

10. Further information on domestic gas safety issues can be found on the HSE web site at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/gas/domestic/index.htm>

HSE Press enquiries

Oliver Glackin 020 7717 6016
Out of hours 020 7928 8382

DWP press enquiries

Jessica Bates 07766 442318

Public enquiries

HSE's InfoLine 0845 3450055
Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG

HSE information and news releases can be accessed on the Internet www.hse.gov.uk/

Annex 1: Gas Appliance Project - Executive Summary

A large survey of every element of each gas appliance in nearly 600 homes was carried out over the summer of 2006. Experienced CORGI registered gas engineers carried out the checks along with surveys of the house and of the householder.

23% of homes were found to have a problem gas appliance installation of some kind. In 3% of all homes a situation existed where there was considered to be a very high risk to the householder of dangerous CO exposure. A further 5% were considered to have a high risk of CO exposure. Gas fires were found to be the most frequently problematic appliance. An indication was found that certain health symptoms could possibly be linked to high CO exposure.

The homes surveyed were mainly from the south and east areas of Greater London and as such do not necessarily constitute a representative sample of homes in the UK. However the sample did cover a range of housing types, ages, tenures, occupant densities, occupant ages, and socio-economic status allowing extrapolations of the results to the UK population.

The following paragraphs sum up the detailed findings of the survey.

Overall results

597 homes were surveyed, 1406 appliances were checked, CP14 notices were issued for 166 individual appliances in 140 homes. Of these 166 notices, 95 referred to Immediately Dangerous (ID) appliances.

Housing stock analysis

Homes surveyed had a higher proportion of terraced housing, and housing built between the wars than the national average. Flats and detached houses were underrepresented by the survey. The survey aimed to include only owner occupied homes but 10% of homes surveyed were rented. This is a lower proportion of rented accommodation than found nationally.

Occupant analysis

Half the homes were occupied by pensioners; a higher proportion than nationally. The distribution of number of occupants was very similar to the national profile. The sample was worse off than average as more people were in receipt of benefits in the sample than nationally.

Household analysis

Most households had British Gas as their gas supplier, but a slightly higher proportion than nationally. Average gas bills were similar to national averages. One third of homes had their gas meter located outside their property. About half of homes had had their appliances checked when they moved into their current home.

Householder analysis

Very few had heard of the Priority Service Register scheme for free appliance checks for pensioners and other eligible persons. CO awareness was poor with 45% having received no information about the dangers of CO. The health of householders was self-reported as being generally good or ok in the majority of cases.

Gas appliance analysis

Almost all homes had a gas boiler, predominant brands were Ideal, Vaillant and Potterton, average age was about 7.5 years. Four fifths of homes had a gas cooker, average age of these was about 8 years old, the main brand was Cannon.

Gas fires were found in less than half of all homes, with an average age of 13 years. Main brands were Valor and Robinson Willey. Only a few homes had gas water heaters.

Problem gas appliance analysis

23% of all homes were found to have at least one problem gas appliance installation. Gas fires were found to be the appliance most likely to be rated as At Risk or Immediately dangerous (28% of all gas fires.) Boilers were least likely (3% of all boilers), cookers were in between (9% of all cookers).

The following all had a higher prevalence of problem gas appliances than other options in their group:

- Semi-detached housing, compared to other house types
- Housing built between the wars, compared to other ages of homes
- Tenure made no difference
- Younger households compared to those with members over the age of 65
- Larger households compared to 1 or 2 member households
- Households in receipt of any benefits, compared to those receiving none

Younger households receiving benefits had more than twice the prevalence of problem gas appliances than those receiving no benefits with at least one member over 65.

Householders reporting more health symptoms related to CO exposure were found to be more likely to have a problem gas appliance installation.

National estimates

To reach a national estimate for the prevalence of problem gas appliances, the data were broken down by different categories and a weighting applied to the proportion found in this survey compared to the proportion found nationally. This resulted in finding a range of estimates from 17% - 26% of homes that could have a problem gas appliance installation. The lowest estimate was based on the age of house, the highest based on proportion of homes with pensioners.

Carbon monoxide measurements

Older appliances were found to have higher CO emissions, in general, appliances that had had no maintenance had higher CO emissions than those that did.

Carbon monoxide exposure risk

Questions were asked about symptoms known to be related to carbon monoxide (CO) exposure, no single symptom was reported in more than 7% of cases. A small number of people (4%) reported 2 or more symptoms.

An estimated exposure risk for households was carried out finding that 3% of homes had a "very high" risk, and a further 5% had a high risk of exposure to dangerous levels of CO.

Respondents reporting 2 or more CO related health symptoms appeared linked to a likelihood of having a problem gas appliance installation and consequently a high risk of CO exposure.

Conclusions

By all estimates considered in this study a large proportion of homes are likely to have a problem gas appliance installation of some kind in their home (around 20%). Nearly 10% of homes were estimated to have a high or very high risk of dangerous CO exposure due to the presence of a problem gas appliance installation. A small number of people (1%) self reported health symptoms and had problem gas appliance installations that may have been linked.

In general the risk of the presence of a problem gas appliance installation to the health of householders depends on behavioural factors, how they use that appliance, and how they use available ventilation.

A problem gas appliance installation is a health risk that can be avoided with maintenance and awareness.

A small number of homes (3 of 600) were found to have life threatening situations in their homes, the identification of these and also the replacement of 5 dangerous cookers in vulnerable households can be considered an important achievement of this project.

[Ends]