

Chemical exposure deaths:

# An unacceptable tragedy

by Dr Simon Buckland

**As many as a thousand people are dying each year in New Zealand from exposure to chemicals. That's nearly three times our national annual road toll. Few, if any, New Zealanders would find that acceptable, yet it continues, year after year after year.**

A lack of awareness and understanding of the harm chemicals can do, a lack of knowledge and resources on how to avoid that harm, a lack of commitment by business owners and managers and a lack of personal responsibility by workers, all contributes to this unacceptable tragedy.

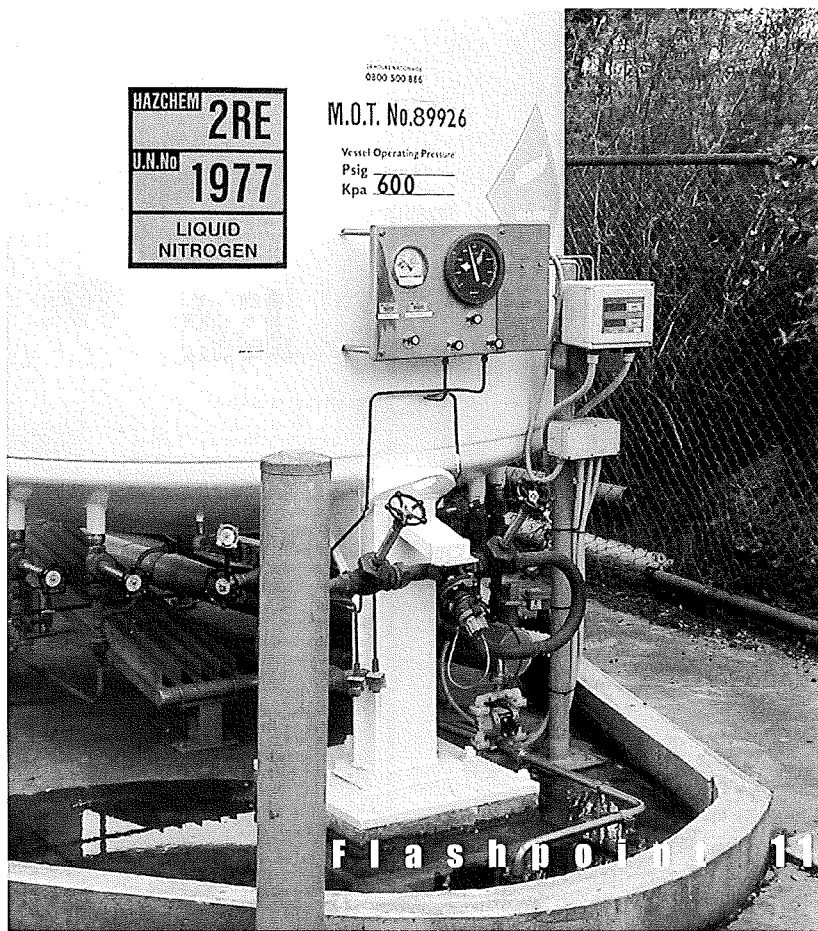
The safe management of chemicals is regulated by our workplace health and safety legislation and prescribed in the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms (HSNO) Act. Without a doubt, a contributing factor to people being harmed is the myth that HSNO is complex.

This myth really rankles with me. I hear of the complexity of HSNO all the time; when I read articles on HSNO or listen to people, it's frequently an underlying theme. And the more it's said, the more people take it at face value. It becomes another reason for people not to do the right

thing, with unfortunately unacceptable consequences.

The reality is that for the majority of businesses that use chemicals, HSNO is not complex. There are some basis steps that are easily taken. These include, for example, ensuring:

- employees have the appropriate specialist training and are using the right personal protective equipment;
- compliant safety data sheets are available for each chemical used – if you don't have them, ask your supplier for them;
- there is appropriate signage for the chemical hazards on site;
- an emergency management plan is available and regularly rehearsed so that staff know what to do if an incident occurs (a template plan is available from <http://www.ermanz.govt.nz/resources/publications/pdfs/ERMA%20Flip%20Chart.pdf>);
- the necessary test certificates – e.g. approved handlers or location test certificates have been obtained (a test certifier can give you the relevant advice on this);
- a 'person in charge' is nominated to take responsibility for ensuring that things get done.



Your local Department of Labour inspector and chemical supplier can provide the advice you need.

## It's your responsibility

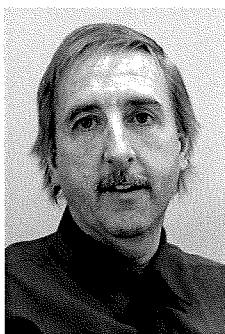
Of course, managing chemicals on some sites will be more involved than on others. For larger industrial sites, implementing HSNO may be more demanding. But when you consider that it is small to medium-sized businesses that deal with most of the chemicals in this country, the steps above will make inroads into reducing the death rate from chemical exposure.

Employers know it is their responsibility to look after their staff, but often their focus is physical hazards. It is vital we start paying more attention to the harm that can occur from chemicals. We're either committed to managing chemicals safely or we're not.

For the sake of your staff, friends and colleagues, take these simple steps that will save people's lives.

Complying with HSNO -- it's straightforward, really.

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## Website for public reporting

ERMA New Zealand has launched a new web page to allow people to report incidents involving hazardous substances. The objective is to better understand how and why such incidents occur and to allow us to take all practicable measures to minimise risk.

While hazardous chemicals are most commonly associated with industrial applications, they can also be found in our homes and on farms.

For example, many workplaces contain hazardous substances such as solvents, dyes, explosives and pesticides. Hazards at home can include fuel in the barbecue and lawnmower, as well as bleach, other cleaning products, paints and solvents.

Unfortunately, incidents can occur involving hazardous substances that may harm people or the environment.

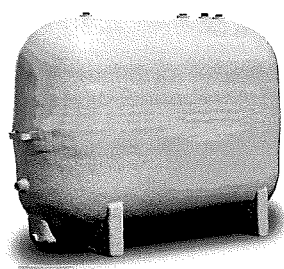
They may occur for example, from an accident, an equipment failure or because people are not following the rules that are set to safely manage hazardous substances.

ERMA monitors incidents that occur which enables us to determine the effectiveness of the regulatory system and whether the rules are working. It can also see if any trends are developing or if particular substances or practices are causing problems.

The incidents webpage can be found at [www.ermanz.govt.nz/hs/incidents.html](http://www.ermanz.govt.nz/hs/incidents.html)

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