

Health and Safety Statistics 2011

The latest statistics from the Health and Safety Executive (“HSE”) contains good and bad news for Britain’s workforce. In some areas there has been improvement in reporting of illness and injury, but there also statistics of concern.

After four years of fatalities declining, the statistics for 2010/11 show an increase, to 171. The construction, agriculture, waste and recycling industries show the highest incidence of fatalities, notwithstanding the regulations in place to ensure the health and safety of workers while at work. Of the 171 fatalities across the country, the construction industry accounted for 50, agriculture, 34, waste and recycling 9. However, by European standards, the numbers are favourable. Whilst there is no common method by which such statistics are collated, comparison with European countries, such as France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Poland illustrates UK performance exceeds European comparators. Of course, amalgamating a number of countries together does not necessarily fairly inform the analyst. One suspects that fatalities in Poland are relatively high, compared with France, for example, and thus may skew the figures. Therefore, for a true analysis of the UK’s performance, it is probably appropriate to cross check the figures against individual European countries performance.

As to non-fatal injuries, in 2010/11 there were 115, 379 reported cases, to employees. Of these, over 24,000 were major injuries, ie those involving fractures, amputations and other injuries resulting in resuscitation. The most common cause of injury were those involving slipping, tripping and falls from height. This statistic is interesting in that falls are still a major cause of accident, notwithstanding The Work at Height Regulations, which were designed to significantly reduce such accidents.

Accidents causing injuries over 3 days totalled over 90,000. The most common kinds of accident were caused by handling, lifting and carrying (36%) and slipping or tripping (23%).

It is interesting that from a sample survey of general practitioners, GPs reported musculoskeletal disorders were the most common type of work related illness. Such a definition includes back pain, the most common cause of work related absence. This has long been the case. Of some surprise, may be that stress, anxiety and depression gives rise to the most working days lost. However, there is some good news, as the number of self-reported work related ill health cases have fallen, both in respect of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as musculoskeletal disorders.

Notwithstanding a reduction in these cases, there are still some diseases that lead to fatality. Each year thousands of people die from work related diseases, mainly due to exposure to toxins over many years. Statistics have to be estimated, as whilst some deaths may be occupation related, that is not always the case. However, the HSE estimate the annual number of occupational cancer deaths is 8000. About half of these are thought to arise from exposure to asbestos, the consequences of which usually arise many years, even decades, after a worker has been exposed to the fibres.

Some workers, having been exposed to fibres, develop mesothelioma and asbestosis. As to mesothelioma, deaths have increased from 153 in 1968, to 2321 in 2009. The annual number of deaths is expected to continue rising and peak in the year 2016.

Unfortunately, nothing can be done about historical exposures to toxins, but employers must work hard to ensure that their current employees are protected from illness and accidents at work. In these challenging economic times, there is a risk that some employers may see expenses relating to health and safety as a cost they can avoid. No direct benefit may be seen from investment in health and safety, although a positive attitude to such a business issue will reduce the number of lost days. At present, 26.4 million working days are lost overall, an average of 15 days per case of work-related illness or workplace injury. This has a direct impact on the economy and thus employers must be encouraged to meet their statutory and common law obligations, to protect their workers and others who are affected by their business.

Others can play their part too, including the HSE. The HSE and local authorities can take action against employers for breach of health and safety rules. However, with only 551 prosecutions, including 33 in Scotland, one may take the view that the HSE are not doing enough. Perhaps there should be more action, to encourage good safety management. The

HSE will argue that they consider each case carefully, taking account of the nature of the breach, the consequences and the public interest. Further, they do other powers, such as enforcement notices, to prohibit bad working practices, which may be deployed, rather than prosecuting employers.

It is clear that there is no single solution to reducing the number of workers killed, injured or made ill, by their occupation. However, with an increase in the number of fatalities and workplace injuries in the last reporting period, neither employers nor the enforcing authorities can be complacent. All stakeholders should actively consider what can be done to reduce death, injuries and illness at work, for the benefit of the economy, the worker and their families. Let us all hope the HSE's report for 2012 reveals further progress in respect of workplace injuries.

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