



SPECIAL INVESTIGATORS – BEHIND THE SCENES IN UNSAFE WORKPLACES

Reality TV series Special Investigators follows workplace health and safety inspectors for the Department of Labour as they investigate the hazards people can encounter in the workplace.

Case study 3 – Concrete Fatality

A simple dismantling job went horribly wrong in Christchurch when a concrete panel weighing four and a half tonnes tipped over, crushing a labourer against a wall.

Department of Labour health and safety inspector Bruce McLaren knows construction sites can be dangerous, and split second decisions can easily lead to serious injury, or in the worst scenario, death. This investigation is no exception.

On site it is Bruce's job to piece together the events that led to the incident. Working with police and the victim's colleagues, Bruce builds a picture of what caused the horrific event to take place.

Interviews with site workers quickly establish that the concrete panel was left freestanding with no support while dismantling work took place around the panel. A supervisor had asked workers to remove the concrete panel's securing bolts a few days earlier as high winds prevented other work.

Once the winds had subsided work commenced around the concrete panel. One employee was working at the top of the panel grinding hook bolts to remove surrounding metal sheets. The victim was standing below when the unsecured concrete panel toppled over, crushing his head. A forklift truck was called in to remove the massive weight from the trapped worker. The worker was rushed to hospital in a critical condition.

During Bruce's investigation, things go from bad to worse for the victim, and his family have to make the difficult decision to remove life support. This vastly increases the importance of the investigation.

It becomes clear that, despite instructions to leave securing bolts in the concrete panel, the supervisor did not follow instructions and workers followed their supervisor's example. This left the concrete panel freestanding, literally waiting to fall over.

The company was eventually prosecuted for "failing to take all practicable steps to ensure the safety of its employees." They were fined \$75,000 and ordered to pay \$60,000 of that to the victim's family.

Bruce said the incident and subsequent prosecution left a clear message, "the chain is only as strong as its strongest link."

'Safety must not be seen as an add-on, but integrated into top level of the organisation.'

Key learnings

- Structures must not be left in a condition in which they could be brought down by a moderate earthquake, moderate wind, or vibration from traffic or plant.
- Usually, a written plan should be prepared [and that] should describe the extent of the work, the type of plant to be used, and the proposed method of removing each part of the structure.
- Never leave isolated walls or potentially unstable structures un-propped.
- Ensure that a competent person is in constant charge of the demolition while it is being carried out.

More information

Download and read the Approved Code of Practice for Demolition.

For general advice on workplace health and safety call 0800 20 90 20.

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Department of Labour
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