



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 1 – Paper Bale Fatality

A forklift operator was fatally injured after being crushed by bales of paper each weighing more than half a tonne. It's an absolute tragedy.

Department of Labour health and safety inspector Valma Harris finds out about the overnight fatality when she comes into work the next morning.

Valma sees from photos that the recycled paper stack next to the one that fell is leaning to one side. The photos reveal that the stacking procedures are at fault.

What's unclear from the evidence gathered is what the victim was doing at the time of the incident. When the fallen bales were removed, the victim's body was found face down, two and a half meters from the forklift he had been using. The machine was in reverse gear with its engine still switched on.

The victim was an experienced operator, who had been a supervisor at the company before choosing to return to a more hands-on role.

Valma talks to the company that services the forklift. Her checks rule out a mechanical problem as a factor in the toppling of the paper.

Interviews with company staff reveal that employees have concerns about the stacking procedures in the warehouse and believe the stacks are too high. It turns out that management do not have a code of practice for stacking.

Valma concludes that the stack that fell was leaning dangerously and, being seven bales high, was stacked higher than Department of Labour guidelines allow.

She also finds that the victim might have survived if he had followed basic safety procedures and stayed inside the protective cage of his machine.

Valma issued an improvement notice to the company, requiring them to immediately address areas where safety was lacking.

The company was prosecuted under Section 6 of the Health and Safety in Employment Act. The company pleaded guilty and was ordered to pay a fine of \$35,000 and reparations of \$40,000 to the family, in addition to \$20,000 the company had already tendered.

Since then, the company has introduced detailed guidelines on safe stacking, which will hopefully prevent such tragedies from occurring again.

'Leadership commitment is crucial. The message about the importance of health and safety needs to come through strongly and clearly from the top.'

Key learnings

- Ensure an effective stacking procedure – nothing over six bales high, to ensure good lighting, and an engineer/storage expert report on weight, shape and centre of gravity. (Reclaim Association guidelines)
- If English is a second language, staff must be conversant with health and safety procedures in the employee's first language. Try using pictograms.
- General health and safety guidance on staff training and hazard identification would probably have prevented the incident.

More information

Download and read the Approved Code of Practice for Training Operators and Instructors of Powered Industrial Lift trucks.

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

Health and Safety
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