

Company fined after teenage apprentice overcome by fumes

An alloy wheel refurbishment company was sentenced after a 16-year-old apprentice worker was overcome by vapours from a chemical used in the stripping and cleaning of alloy wheels.

South Tyneside Magistrates' Court heard how, on 12 December 2017, the employee of Wheelnut Ltd, entered an area of the company's former premises in Swalwell, Newcastle upon Tyne, known as the "acid room". The employee entered the room to retrieve alloy wheels from one of three barrels of a chemical substance containing Dichloromethane (DCM), Methanol and Hydrofluoric Acid used in the stripping process. He was subsequently found by a colleague slumped unconscious over a barrel.





An investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found a risk assessment for the chemical wheel stripping process was not suitable or sufficient. Appropriate control measures should have included suitable exhaust ventilation in the room as well as respiratory protective equipment (RPE) for the employees. RPE was provided but it was not maintained in an efficient or effective state. Several parts of it were damaged and the air feed to it from the compressor was not filtered correctly. The investigation found that on this occasion, and previously, the employee was not wearing the RPE when he entered the room. Employees were not provided with suitable and sufficient information, instruction, and training with regards to the risks involved with using the chemicals, particularly the risks involved with using DCM.

Wheelnut Ltd of Whickham Bank, Swalwell, Newcastle upon pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. The company was fined £32,000 and ordered to pay full costs of £1718.50.

Speaking after the hearing, HSE inspector Joy Craighead said: "A young worker suffered a potentially serious injury. Breathing in DCM vapour can produce narcotic effects and, at high concentrations, unconsciousness and death. In this instance, the boy made a full recovery, but it could have easily resulted in his death."

For more information on this, please visit:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/wis19.pdf>

Notes to Editors:

1. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. We prevent work-related death, injury and ill health through regulatory actions that range from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors through to targeted interventions on individual businesses. These activities are supported by globally recognised scientific expertise. www.hse.gov.uk
2. More about the legislation referred to in this case can be found at: www.legislation.gov.uk/
3. HSE news releases are available at <http://press.hse.gov.uk>

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