

Common sense, common safety

In the aftermath of Lord Young of Graffham's long awaited 'Common Sense, Common Safety' report, most health and safety engineers must be thinking, 'so what?'. Setting aside his now infamous gaff, Lord Young's only noteworthy recommendations are the register of safety consultants, and consolidating health and safety regulations – although the latter cannot apply to high-hazard plants.

That said, of course there is value in his moves against misguided, obfuscatory and over-zealous officials, typified by the media's periodic 'bonkers conkers' reports. Similarly, his determination to halt Britain's increasing compensation culture is timely. Both have served only to demean health and safety as a whole, and need to stop.

Equally, Lord Young's nod to the effectiveness of the HSE (Health & Safety Executive), in both setting and enforcing safety standards across British industry, is to be welcomed – although, in a time of austerity, there is room for concern over that august institution's ability to keep on rising to the challenge.

As BSIF (the British Safety Industry Federation) chief executive David Lummis puts it: "We are confident that, as long as it is ensured that the resources are available within the HSE, [the report's] actions will be undertaken and implemented."

'As long as' are the operative words here – because, although the latest health and safety statistics show encouraging reductions in deaths and serious injuries year-on-year, the numbers themselves remain stubbornly and frighteningly high (see page 10). And, as HSE head of manufacturing Geoff Cox warns: "As Britain moves out of recession and work starts up again, we must continue to focus on real health and safety. History shows that accident rates rise in such periods, as new workers are taken on and industry works closer to its capacity."

His worry: we don't want recent improvements to be lost as the economic recovery puts pressure both on industry to take shortcuts and on HSE to bear some of the cuts implicit in the coalition government's comprehensive spending review.

That is the nub of it, particularly given the dilemma that plant engineers face every day. We know that 25–30% of workplace accidents in manufacturing (more in other sectors) are connected with maintenance. So, bearing down on the ongoing issues of misused isolation, inadequate permit to work schemes, poor provision for working at height, etc, cannot be allowed to fall victim to under-investment in HSE.

And neither can HSE's ongoing work on addressing other emerging risks. Plant engineers need an assurance that common sense will prevail for common safety.

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Comment