Comment

Safety under the microscope

With the publication in mid February of the final report into the 2005 Buncefield explosion and fire – Britain's most expensive industrial disaster – any remaining doubt that the primary causes were failings in safety management will have evaporated for ever (headlines, page 3).

'The Buncefield explosion: why did it happen?' tells the unabridged story of the HSE and Environment Agency investigation, this time including details previously withheld while the criminal prosecution and appeals processes were in train. It makes harrowing reading, but the key takeaway is the critical importance of safety equipment, processes and management, which, according to the HSE, "did not get the attention, resources or priority status they required".

This is not a new observation, but it is an important one, nonetheless, for all operations engineers and managers – particularly, but not only, those involved with high hazard plants. As Gordon MacDonald, chairman of the COMAH (Control of Major Accident Hazards) Competent Authority Strategic Management Group, which published the report, puts it: "Companies that work in a high hazardous industry need to have strong safety systems in place, underpinned by the right safety culture. Buncefield is a stark reminder of the potential result of a poor attitude towards safety."

Timely, then, that the Energy Institute, Lloyd's Register and the HSE should have published a report just last month on identifying early warning signals for process plants that could help industry to anticipate some of the failures in workplace safety (page 6). It's worth a read, because what's new is this group's proposed metrics, which purport to quantify human factors that affect the likely safety performance of an organisation, especially with regard to how workforces interact with higher-risk assets.

Timely also that the notion of risk-based methodologies for safety management should be gaining traction, even for high hazard plants (cover story, page 8). They herald not only the arrival of lower cost approaches to proving safety, but also the dawn of more proportionate and analytical thinking, in place of blind adherence.

All of us would like to believe that Buncefield acted as an, albeit terrible, wake-up call, prompting those in charge, or in the firing line, to review and update their safety processes and equipment. No one wants to witness a similar, or worse, catastrophe.

But if you're after an incentive, it's worth remembering that, in July last year, five companies were fined a total of £9.5million for their part in the Buncefield catastrophe, while the estimated cost to the community exceeded £1billion and remains ongoing.

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