

From the pan to the fire!

As we all know, businesses are coming under increasing pressure to comply with health and safety law. Whatever you may think about the regulations, being a responsible employer means looking after the health and welfare of your employees and colleagues.

The funeral industry in particular is facing a number of challenges in the near future with balancing the traditional methods with the risks associated with current practices. One example being the carrying of coffins, particularly in and out of private homes versus manual handling risks.

Another major risk area is in the mortuary with the use of formaldehyde based embalming fluids. The dangers of formaldehyde are well documented; the possible risks to health from the use of formaldehyde include respiratory sensitization, asthma, rhinitis, pulmonary oedema, irritation of eyes, nose, throat and mucous membrane, dermatitis, nausea and depression.

The most significant risk associated with formaldehyde use however, is cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer, (part of the world health organisation) and the National Institute of Cancer have both classified formaldehyde as a cancer causing agent in humans. Some people have doubted this fact but these institutions have an unblemished record and have never removed a substance from their lists retrospectively. Recently an embalmer was also heard arguing against these claims by asking how many cases of cancer in humans caused by formaldehyde are known to exist. Of course the answer is that nobody has yet isolated formaldehyde as the cause of cancer in anybody. This argument is the same one used in the 1950's to defend smoking cigarettes and was used again in the 1960's about the claims that asbestos caused cancer in humans, it's just a matter of time.

So the search for a safe alternative to formaldehyde embalming fluids is and has been on for some time. Even one of the major manufacturers of formaldehyde- based products is removing or reducing formaldehyde in a number of its products and this must be applauded. As for embalming fluids the market has recently seen an influx of products claiming to be "formaldehyde free".

The initial response is that this has to be a good thing; however we must ask ourselves if the formaldehyde is gone what is in its place? Will it still work, how does it work and most important of all is it any safer than formaldehyde? If all we are doing is substituting one dangerous chemical with another then we are not making any progress. The expression "*out of the pan and into the fire*" springs to mind!

Some of the "alternative" products now available do not contain formaldehyde but do contain glutaraldehyde or Phenol. What do we know about these two substances?

In the case of glutaraldehyde we know that exposure to this substance can cause irritation to skin, eyes, throat and lungs and once sensitised by this substance very small amounts of exposure can cause dermatitis, rhinitis and asthma. This all sounds very familiar. In fact one NHS trust in Scotland recently withdrew from the use of products containing glutaraldehyde after being fined £3000 when an employee was diagnosed as suffering from occupational asthma after being exposed to glutaraldehyde working in an operating theatre.

Low-level exposure to Phenol can cause respiratory irritation, headaches and burning eyes. High or prolonged exposure can cause muscle pain, weight loss, respiratory cancer, heart disease and attacks the immune system. Need I say more?

From this we can see that just being formaldehyde free is not good enough. What is required is an alternative that is not only free from formaldehyde but also free from any toxic substance likely to adversely affect your health. Any new product needs to be something that will satisfy the requirements of the European biocide regulations, in order that it will be certified for use as an embalming fluid beyond 2008.

Well is there anything out there that fits the bill?

There is only one product currently available that is formaldehyde free, completely non-toxic and is to be submitted for approval in 2006 to the European biocide products directive for use in embalming.

That product is **AARDBalm**. This product has been developed over the last three years with rigorous trials that have resulted in tremendous leaps forward in the last twelve months, to the point now where the product is in daily use by arguably the largest UK funeral business as well as by many independent companies. AARDBalm has been demonstrated over recent months to regional groups of B.I.E. members in Scotland, Birmingham, Kingston and most recently to a group of the Irish division of the B.I.E. in Dublin at the invitation of Paul Fitzhenry the divisional secretary of that region. Paul said, "the demonstration went very well with a very good result, the appearance was very pleasing and the family completely unsolicited said that they were very pleased with how their loved one looked at the funeral".

Whilst **AARDBalm** still has its limitations, for instance it is not a long term preservative and therefore should not be used for repatriation, depending on the circumstances, environment and the skill of the embalmer, AARDBalm can be used in up to 90% of cases, reducing exposure to formaldehyde or other harmful chemicals by up to 90%. This can and must be considered a massive step in the right direction for the industry and everybody involved in it.

Beware of hazardous impostors and try the only safe alternative, **AARDBalm**.