Safety spotlight

Run by the Neil family, Little Valley Restorations has an exposure control plan inspired by an institutional-scale model.

## Stopping exposure to sensitizers in autobody repair

By Kathy Eccles

Fit-tested respirators, clean-shaven faces, and air purifiers are all part of the work day at Little Valley Restorations — a medium-sized business that takes potential exposure to sensitizers very seriously.

It was the day before her birthday when occupational hygiene officer Susan de Leeuw visited Little Valley Restorations in Ladysmith, B.C. Her visit was part of a WorkSafeBC campaign to educate employers on the risks of isocyanate exposure, as part of the Occupational Disease Strategy.

Isocyanates are part of a group of harmful chemical compounds known as sensitizers. Vapours, dust, and particulates containing isocyanates can produce allergic skin and respiratory reactions, ranging from a rash or runny nose to life-threatening asthma attacks.

"Even a small exposure can lead to a hyperactive immune response," says Barry Nakahara, manager, Prevention Field Services, at WorkSafeBC. Once a worker is sensitized to isocyanates, sensitization is permanent and reactions are often severe. In autobody repair shops, isocyanates are produced in the two-part process of mixing hardeners into paint primers and clear coats. But, in de Leeuw's experience, industry awareness of isocyanates and sensitization was low, and she was expecting a tough sell.

"One or two painters had heard of isocyanates in nine or ten visits," says de Leeuw. "There was little or no awareness of signs and symptoms of dermal and respiratory exposure to sensitizers."

## Anatomy of a site visit

At Little Valley Restorations, de Leeuw went through the normal procedures for a site visit.

"I have a set of questions I go through to see what is in place," she explains. "I ask about first aid, respirator fit tests, supplied air tests, safety data sheets, and exposure control plans."

Production manager Travis Neil gave de Leeuw responses that she didn't expect.

"The first surprise was they had air-flow testing and respirator fit tests completed. They had fit-test records

that went back quite a way. This was a good start," says de Leeuw.

Next, he showed her the shop's detailed isocyanate exposure control plan and a certificate for a compressed breathing air test.

"I was really impressed that they were testing the air and had an exposure control plan," adds de Leuw. "They sure are trying to protect their workers' health. This was a great birthday gift."

## Creating an exposure control plan

Little Valley Restoration is run by the Neil family, headed by John Neil, who opened the business in 1980. His son, Travis, inherited his approach to safety. "He started me out as safe as possible, teaching me 'Don't be the cool guy."

Travis Neil's wife, Cayla, developed the shop's isocyanate exposure control plan. She had previous experience working for advisors in the Health and Safety Department at Vancouver Island University.

"My mentors gave me insight into how to develop thorough procedures on a large institutional scale. Seeing plans at this level was a natural progression into being able to create and implement a plan in a small-business environment."

To start, Cayla enlisted the buy-in of suppliers. "Ian [from Lordco] gave us a document that was a framework to start with and said, 'Add your detail to it and customize it to your business." Cayla identified each product containing isocyanates and where exposure occurs. Everyone on staff was then educated on signs and symptoms of isocyanate sensitivity.

She stays up to date on safety regulations and industry-specific hazards, and looks to WorkSafeBC's website as a resource. She advises, "Change your mindset about WorkSafeBC and see it as an avenue to keep your employees safe."

## "Shave or go home"

In Little Valley Restoration's shop, a dozen painters and apprentices work in 14 well-ventilated operating bays. Two giant air purifiers push fresh air down from above, filter dust, and clean contaminated air. "They take particulates out of the atmosphere," John explains. "They're portable and can move from one job to another."

Fresh air is supplied into the spray booth and workers wear full-face air-supplied respirators, as well as chemically impervious disposable suits, gloves, and boots. A supplier brings in a free respirator fit test kit each year. Workers must be clean-shaven for a proper seal.

John maintains, "We have a shaving kit in our washroom for our guys. If they come in with three days' growth, it's 'Shave or go home.'"

Travis agrees: "We don't want anyone exposed or sensitized. In such a small business, it's a close-knit group. Every worker is important. It's our well-being."  $\odot$ 

