



energy retail association

The Energy Retail Association (ERA) is the trade organisation which represents all major domestic suppliers of electricity and gas in Great Britain. A major component of its work is the preparation and execution of policy on a range of key issues for the sector, including selling, billing, transfers, regulation, energy efficiency, social issues and new technology.

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June 07

Carbon Monoxide poisoning

ERA's Position

www.energy-retail.org.uk/carbonmonoxide

The ERA's aspiration is to eliminate Carbon Monoxide (CO) related fatalities. We are making good progress. The energy retail sector has already helped the Government achieve its target of reducing avoidable gas related CO fatalities by a minimum of 20% per year, well ahead of the target date of 2010. But we must ensure this reducing level is sustainable as we strive for our goal of zero fatalities.



CARBON MONOXIDE ALARM

The facts

- Carbon Monoxide (CO) is a colourless, odourless, poisonous gas, produced as a side effect of burning carbon-based fuels. It can result from all fossil fuels - not just gas fires and boilers
- CO inhalation can be fatal and the symptoms of CO poisoning are similar to many common ailments and could easily be misdiagnosed
- CO related fatalities have fallen each year from 16 in the UK in 2001, to 12 in 2005
- Fitting CO detectors in all homes would dramatically reduce the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning
- The six major energy suppliers are committed to a programme of raising awareness among their 25 million customers - particularly vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the very young, students, or those in rented property
- These same suppliers have instigated a programme of supplying CO detectors free of charge to vulnerable groups
- Government action is needed to penalise poor equipment installation



What is the energy industry doing?

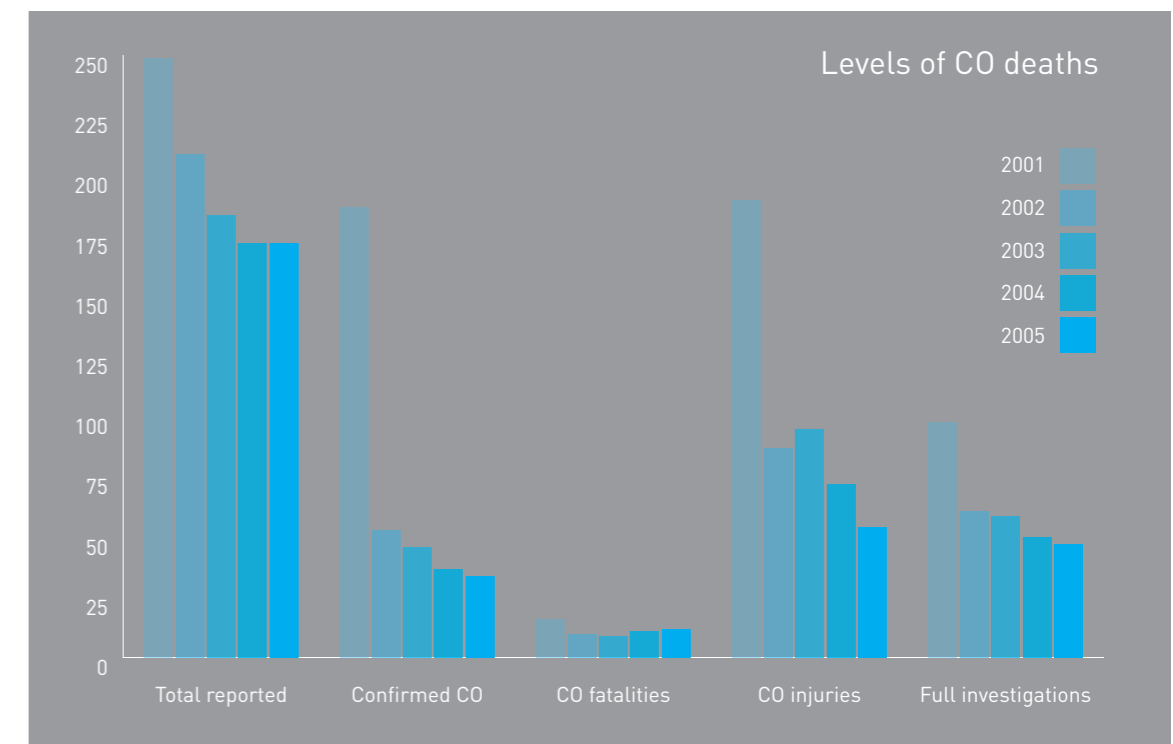
Three years ago the Health and Safety Executive asked energy suppliers to conduct a risk assessment of Carbon Monoxide and identify some solutions. The report concluded that the key areas of vulnerability included:

- **Insufficient servicing of appliances**
- **Defective flues**
- **Flue inversion and ventilation deficiencies**
- **A relatively low level of customer awareness of dangers, risks and symptoms of CO**
- **Terraced properties and properties that were 'bought to rent' were at a higher level of risk, and the very young and the very old were most vulnerable to carbon monoxide poisoning**

The ERA together with the energy retail sector has been working closely with a range of stakeholders including CORGI, appliance manufacturers and CO Awareness – one of the victim support groups.

We are now building on previous work to sustain and improve upon this downward trend in CO related deaths.

Currently, all energy suppliers have a variety of mechanisms to make their customers aware of the dangers of CO poisoning.



On CO Awareness Day - 6 December 2006 - the six major energy suppliers announced a new commitment to distribute information to their 25 million gas and electricity customers, advising them of the dangers of CO, the warning signs to look out for and the measures they can undertake to guard against poisoning. Information is being disseminated via leaflets, energy bills, online accounts and other direct marketing avenues.

In addition, during 2006, suppliers worked to ensure CO detectors are as accessible as possible and, through a range of negotiation approaches, most suppliers offer them at well below retail price. This move has resulted in the cost of detectors **decreasing by 50%** over the last year, and the average current cost is **under £20**.

Suppliers also offer **free gas safety checks** to priority group customers and this, as well as the activities mentioned above, will continue and be built on throughout 2007.

Risk, signs to look out for, and what to do

You are at risk from CO poisoning if your appliance was poorly installed, is not working properly or has not been checked for safety or maintained regularly. You are also at risk if there is not enough fresh air in the room, your chimney or flue gets blocked up or you allow non-CORGI registered engineers to install or maintain your appliance.

Symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning can easily be mistaken for other common ailments and can include:

- Tiredness
- Drowsiness
- Headaches
- Giddiness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Pains in the chest
- Breathlessness
- Stomach pains
- Erratic behaviour
- Visual problems



Inspecting your home appliances can also help alert you to potential danger. Signs to look out for include:

- Yellow or brown staining around, or on appliances
- Pilot lights that frequently blow out
- Increased condensation inside windows
- Yellow rather than blue flame (apart from flueless fires)

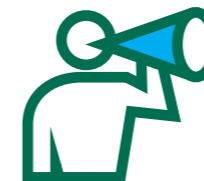
If you think your appliance is spilling Carbon Monoxide:

- Call the Gas Emergency 24 hour hotline - 0800 111 999
- Switch off the appliance and do not reuse until remedial action has been taken
- Open all doors and windows to ventilate the room – do not sleep in it
- Visit your GP urgently and tell them that you believe your symptoms may be related to CO poisoning and request either a blood and/or breath sample
- Contact a CORGI registered installer to make repairs
- Install an approved carbon monoxide detector

Key activities undertaken by the industry

- CO detectors distributed free of charge to vulnerable customers
- Campaigning media activity including local radio stations using celebrity presenters
- Leaflets to customers
- Targeted messages to students and other groups including vulnerable customers
- Poster and leaflet regional campaigns
- Safety pages on company websites
- Limited free exchange programmes for faulty or dangerous appliances
- Joint industry group to raise consumer awareness

Calls on Government



Only 50% of appliances are fitted by CORGI registered installers. Unregistered installers need to be driven out, and more support given to CORGI. Encouraging registration and penalising unregistered installers would be a welcome start.

The energy supplier industry lobbied for tougher standards in the Home Information Packs but unfortunately they were not incorporated. Landlords are already obligated to ensure appliances are checked and the Home Information Packs could be used in the same way so that a change of occupancy could trigger an automatic service and then a three year rolling compulsory check - similar to the MOT for cars - could begin. Similarly, a requirement could be sought that a household insurance policy could only be granted once a gas appliance's safety certificate had been granted to a householder. CO detectors should become as customary as smoke alarms – especially in houses that are deemed most at risk, with all new build properties having CO detectors fitted as mandatory, as they do smoke alarms.

The Government could consider diverting public money into subsidising cheaper CO detectors.

There should be an accelerated replacement programme of open flue appliances – 76% of all incidents happen with a open flued appliance, and 57% of all deaths occur with open flued central heating boilers



What are other possible solutions?

There is no common cause of carbon monoxide poisoning and a range of factors contribute to the risk. The ERA working group concluded that a harmonised approach by all industry and government stakeholders was necessary to mitigate the risk and is working towards this end.

There are a number of causes of CO poisoning ranging from defective flues to the lack of boiler servicing, and this is why we believe the Government, HSE, CORGI, Energy Saving Trust, Consumer Safety Groups, medical practitioners, appliance manufacturers and all fuel retailers need to work together on this serious issue.

Bill Callaghan, Chair of the Health and Safety Commission, says:

“I am encouraged by the outcome of the survey of ERA members’ activities in raising awareness about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning. There has been considerable effort to find innovative ways in communicating effectively with consumers and co-ordinate suppliers’ campaigns.”

The CO-Gas Safety website states:

“CO-Gas Safety is lobbying for the implementation of two recommendations made by the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) in 2000; That the gas supply companies (the charity would prefer the whole fuel industry) pay a levy for publicity about the dangers of CO and for research and, that the gas emergency service, which has a duty to make safe from CO as well as from natural gas, has equipment to test for and undertakes tests for this invisible, odourless and silent killer.”



Useful websites

Department for Work and Pensions - www.dwp.gov.uk

Health and Safety Executive - www.hse.gov.uk

Corgi - www.trustcorgi.com

CO-Awareness - www.co-awareness.co.uk - 07715 899 296

CO-Awareness is run by CO victims, who offer support to those poisoned by carbon monoxide, their families, carers and friends while trying to raise awareness about the dangers of CO to both the general public and the medical profession.

