

A scientific instrument company and a safety consultant have appeared in court after workers were exposed to hazardous chemicals. Cambridge Magistrates' Court heard that employees at Prior Scientific Instruments Ltd's factory in Fulbourn were exposed to harmful substances between September 2002 and December 2009.

In November 2009, the partner of paint sprayer, Adam Coventon, contacted the HSE as she was concerned that he was becoming ill due to the nature of his work. Mr Coventon's job involved him painting small components for scientific instruments. He was also required to clean the metal before painting it by using a trichloroethylene, which acts as a powerful de-greaser. The chemical is a known irritant as it contains isocyanates.

The 36-year-old suffered irritation to his eyes, breathing difficulties, headaches, and lost the ability to concentrate. He is now unable to work, owing to his conditions.

The HSE visited the site and identified that workers who were using a solder were being exposed to a rosin called colophony, which is a respiratory irritant. The investigation identified the company didn't have suitable systems in place to remove the hazardous fumes from the workplace. It also failed to provide employees with health surveillance.

The company had contracted Keith Whiting, trading as KW Consultants, to act as its health and safety consultant. However, he didn't provide suitable information and advice to enable the company to ensure the health and well-being of employees.

The HSE issued a Prohibition Notice to Prior Scientific Instruments, which required it to cease using the degreaser and the solder until a safe system of work was created. It also issued an Improvement Notice, requiring the company to review its health and safety management arrangements.

HSE inspector Robert Meardon said: "Prior Scientific Instruments failed to ensure the health of its employees because it employed the wrong person to give it health and safety advice. Mr Whiting's background was in quality control and he did not have adequate knowledge of health and safety for the work going on in this company. He failed to make them aware of the dangers regarding the use of hazardous chemicals."

Prior Scientific Instruments appeared in court on 10 January and pleaded guilty to breaching s2(1) of the HSWA 1974. It was fined £9000 and ordered to pay full costs of £2852. Keith Whiting also appeared at the hearing and pleaded guilty to breaching s3(2) of the same Act. He was fined £1500 and ordered to pay £1500 in costs. Whiting said he only worked one day a month for Prior Scientific Instruments and claimed the company didn't listen to his advice. He has no previous safety convictions and cooperated with the investigation.

After the hearing, inspector Meardon added: "In 2010, the Government commissioned Lord Young to review health and safety laws and, among the findings, the inquiry recognised that there were a lot of people claiming to be health and safety experts, who were, in fact, not. The national register of health and safety consultants (OSHCR) has been set up as a result. All the consultants who are registered are members of a recognised professional body, and it is important that firms seeking to use a consultant choose one from the register." The inspector confirmed that Whiting is not a member of the register

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