

### **Oblivious to the Dangers?**

Most people know the obvious hazards in their shops. Painters know isocyanates can cause health problems. People who weld (usually) know that looking at the arc is a bad thing to do. Those who work under cars know that the vehicles need to be supported safely, lest they fall. But there are less common or less publicized hazards, too. And unless you are aware of them, you'll casually and carelessly expose yourself or your workers to their dangers, without taking the precautions to make the work safe.

We've recently seen problems caused by some of those less common hazards. Cleaning cars? Car soap isn't particularly bad. Trying to repair the roof of a car? Everyone uses ladders and platforms. The one thing these have in common: people tend to be oblivious to their dangers.

Detailing cars is a relatively simple task, one usually given to someone who hasn't had the specialized training that mechanics, technicians and painters receive (and who sometimes lacks the ability to read the English label on the products). Most of the products used aren't particularly nasty. But have you ever looked at what's in some wheel cleaners? Would you be comfortable using a product with this warning? "Danger...Burns may not be immediately painful or visible. Deep tissue injury and bone damage is possible from skin contact. May be fatal if absorbed through the skin."

Your wheel cleaner surely isn't that nasty, is it? Have you looked at its label? Does it say CORROSIVE? And if so, have you warned the detailers about the danger of serious burns? Do your detailers always wear gloves when they work with wheel cleaners? Do they protect their eyes? Chemical safety goggles would be best, but safety glasses and a face shield will offer some protection. If you use wheel cleaners that contain hydrofluoric acid, do you have an antidote for skin contact? Plain soap and water won't be effective against those burns – you need calcium gluconate gel. You should be able to get that from your first aid supplier or your pharmacy.

Of course, you could make life easier and switch to a less hazardous chemical. Don't take your supplier's words for what's safer, though. Read the label and the material safety data sheet. What warnings do they give? We caution that there are tremendous differences in how MSDSs are written, with some making the innocuous stuff sound deadly and others being blasé about serious hazards. But read the overview, the health effects, and the first aid measures.

Body techs and mechanics work with chemicals, but they're not as likely as detailers to get severe chemical burns. Instead, their injuries are more likely to be from strains, or tools...or falls. Because cars can't easily be flipped onto their sides, some shops use ladders or scaffolds to reach the taller areas. That's not a bad idea, but those ladders and scaffold are another hazard to which most people don't give enough thought. What keeps the scaffold from collapsing? What keeps people from falling off?

If your employees use ladders or scaffolds, teach them to check its condition first. All the scaffold's connecting pins need to be in place, all the parts need to be securely connected. The scaffold should be plumb and level. Leaning towers are suitable for Pisa, not for your shop. The work surface needs to be fully planked – standing on a board only a foot wide is fine for acrobats, but we doubt that you hired for gymnastic ability. OSHA only mandates guard rails for scaffolds over ten feet in height, but we think fall protection (guard rails) is needed on scaffolds over 6 feet tall. Think about it: would you want to fall from that height onto a concrete floor?

When you're repairing cars, you're working with heavy machines, powerful tools, dangerous chemicals. Being oblivious to the hazards leads you into dangerous territory. You don't need to be paranoid. But you do need to think about what could go wrong, so you can take the steps to prevent that. Remember the caution that shows up on every financial prospectus: Past performance is not indicative of future results. Because you've been lucky so far isn't a guarantee your luck will hold. But if you know the hazards and take steps to avoid them, future results will be a lot more promising.

If you have questions about hazards in your shop or safer alternatives, workplace safety rules, or other safety issues, contact CHESS at 651-481-9787; toll free at 877-481-9787, or [carkey@chess-safety.com](mailto:carkey@chess-safety.com).