

When there is no cure, prevention is essential

Educating young New Zealanders about the dangers of long term exposure to industrial chemicals and solvents is something Glove Up campaigner Tony Gibson is not only passionate about – he's personally involved.

It is the link to cancer that he is most desperate to educate young people about, he says.

Tony and his wife Annette launched the Glove Up campaign following the death in 2003 of their 29 year old son, Jason, from acute promyelocytic leukemia.

Like Tony, Jason was a painter by trade, with ACC eventually acknowledging his death as 'industrial death through solvents.'

Tony Gibson says Jason's tragic death is not an isolated case and Statistics today show 1000 people die of emissions every year in New Zealand and a further 1700 people die every year from work related diseases. This, on average, means 50 people every week are dying unnecessarily, he says.

A solvent is a substance used to dissolve or dilute another substance to create a solution. Solvents are often a mixture of chemicals and can be extremely dangerous.

Solvents enter the body through inhalation, skin absorption and by digestion of droplets. Solvents can be detected in the body within 30 seconds of skin contact.

"The chemicals change your genetics and chromosomes – that's what causes cancer," Gibson says.

"We're in an epidemic of cancer. This is what we've got to tell people. We're not saying don't use these chemicals, but if you have to use them, identify it and protect yourself."

Solvents have different effects on humans, depending on their type, the length and frequency of exposure and the concentration of the solvent in the inhaled air.

Short term exposure can cause dizziness, headaches, dermatitis or skin problems, poor coordination and nausea. These effects usually occur quickly, while exposure to very high concentrations can lead to unconsciousness or even death.

Long term repeated exposure may lead to neurotoxicity (damage to the brain and nervous system), skin problems, liver and/or kidney damage, fertility problems, damage to

the blood forming system and damage to the unborn foetus.

Some carcinogenic solvents, such as Benzene and Toluene, can cause cancer.

Solvents are commonly used in a number of industries, including cleaning, drycleaning, spray painting, painting, chemical manufacturing, plastics, printing and footwear.

Reducing the risks

Gibson says while employers are ultimately responsible for taking all possible measures to prevent their staff from being exposed to solvents, there are several easy ways to help prevent exposure.

Investigate whether a solvent can be substituted for a less harmful one or whether the job can be done differently to minimise or eliminate exposure.

Where possible, control exposure by employing mechanical/automated handling methods. Isolate the area in which the solvent is used and improve ventilation.

Prevent or minimise entry to high-solvent areas by posting signs.

Use personal protective equipment specific to the solvent/chemical you are using, including protective clothing to cover all exposed parts of the body and personal clothing, as well as gloves, eye protection and suitable respirators.

Glove Up campaign

Gibson is campaigning for clearer identification of toxic solvents on product packaging.

"We can't ban chemicals but we can identify and make sure the people who are using them can protect themselves against long-term exposure," he says.

"We have to isolate, minimise and eliminate."

Gibson wants the Glove Up symbol, which shows a gloved hand protecting the circle of blood, to be printed on the label of every chemical that has a cancer rating of one, two or three.

He says while some companies and industries are making big moves to protect their employees from solvent exposure, there is still a long way to go.



Glove Up campaigners Tony and Annette Gibson, whose son Jason died of cancer due to industrial solvents

"We've got to get awareness out there.

If we can get our symbol out there we could cut the cancer risk by 50 percent – I really believe that."

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