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Improving the use of respiratory protection

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Abstract

Respiratory protective equipment (RPE) isn't the first choice in the hierarchy of control. In fact it appears well down the ladder of options to consider. But in many workplaces RPE is used as part of a control strategy. With effective use of suitable RPE, adequate control of exposure is possible. But as the latest published figures on ill health caused by inhalation exposure show, we still tend not to be getting respiratory protection right. Why is this when there is a wide choice of very good RPE on the market? Where are we going wrong?

If those who have access to RPE often fail to get it right, how can we hope to improve respiratory protection in areas around the world where many thousands of workers are exposed to hazardous substances without access to adequate control?

A great deal of time and effort is invested in bringing RPE to market which includes design of the product, developing performance standards, and testing and certification of RPE. If the same degree of investment is continued through to the selection and use of RPE - by means of improved safety culture through better communications and training strategies, clear guidance that really help RPE users, and a better understanding of the real in-use performance of RPE - we may start to see real improvements in its use ultimately leading to reduced exposure. Reduced exposure means fewer workers becoming ill - an inspirational aim.

The ISRP has a wealth of knowledge and we can make a difference, either as individuals or collectively. We have started through our educational programme and through involvement in stakeholder initiatives, but we can't do it by ourselves. We need to embark on a more strategic approach, engaging with RPE manufacturers and other stakeholders throughout all the steps in the respiratory protection programme.