

Are you meeting the legal requirements for Legionella control?

- Gary Nicholls, Managing Director of Swiftclean, offers advice

Ever since veterans of the American Legion became ill with pneumonia at the Legion's convention in Philadelphia in 1976, as a result of which several people died, the unpleasant form of pneumonia caused by legionella pneumophila, as the bacterium was subsequently named, has been called Legionnaires' Disease. The bacterium is difficult to culture and Legionnaires' Disease is therefore difficult to diagnose positively. It is not passed from person to person, but instead is contracted from an aerosol spray of water that carries the bacterium. The infected water can come from something as simple as a hotel shower, from a water storage tank that is part of a heating or water supply system, from a calorifier (a device that heats fluids by circulating them over heating coils) or from redundant pipework that still holds stagnant water. Cooling towers that are part of air conditioning systems have been a frequent source of legionella infection.

Legionnaires' Disease can, and sometimes does, kill, but, as a rule, fewer than one in ten people infected die of the infection. A report published by Health Protection Scotland, for example, showed that in 2006 there were 42 reported cases in Scotland, 3 of which resulted in death. However, from the NHS standpoint, the disease is difficult and therefore expensive to treat, partly because it is not easy to prove positively that an individual is infected with legionella, and partly because the pneumonia can persist, and continue to use a hospital bed, for weeks.

The legionella bacterium is at its happiest in hot weather, and when it is living in water at temperatures between 20°C and 45°C. Logically, therefore, the risk is greatest in high summer and when heating systems are fully employed during the winter.

COSHH regulations

It is not surprising, therefore, that, under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations, owners and operators of all commercial premises, including schools, retirement homes, social housing, health care, offices, prisons, MoD sites, hotels, leisure centres and many others, have a statutory duty to control the risk of legionella bacteria. Owners and operators of buildings are required to:

1. Identify and assess the sources of risk
2. Prepare a scheme for preventing or controlling the risk
3. Appoint a person to be managerially responsible
4. Implement and manage precautions
5. Keep records of the precautions implemented

Doing just that much is a considerable task and responsibility, especially if one takes account of the penalties that follow if legionella infection is traced to a building for which you are responsible. Handling the regular routine tasks necessary under the regulations is also something to keep a maintenance person quite busy, such as:

1. Weekly flushing of little used outlets.
2. Monthly temperature test results at representative outlets.
3. Quarterly descaling of shower heads and spray taps.
4. Annual inspection of calorifiers.
5. Annual water tank inspection.
6. 24-monthly legionella risk assessment review.
7. Maintaining detailed records of how and when these tasks were carried out.
8. Dealing with the regular visits by a water hygiene surveyor who will visit at regular intervals to ensure that legionella risks are being properly controlled.

Maybe you could do with a little expert help?

As is shown when occasional prosecutions get to court, some organisations simply disregard the regulations, do not do what is required and take a massive chance. This approach could result in deaths and will almost certainly end at some point in prosecution and heavy fines for non-compliance.

A rather better approach is to budget to obey the law fully. Quite a few companies around Britain provide full legionella control services, but my company, Swiftclean (www.swiftclean.co.uk) has more experience, more qualifications and accreditations, and more expertise than most. Before placing a legionella control contract with another supplier, check what they actually provide.

The Swiftclean service provides some valuable extras that will enhance your staff's understanding of the problems and of your organisation's obligations under the law. Check whether the service provided by the company you plan to use includes:

1. Free legionella control training seminars
2. Free quotations and technical advice throughout the UK

3. All work carried out in accordance with the Legionella Control Association's code of control.
4. Risk assessments and control schemes carried out to L8, BSRIA and CIBSE guidelines.
5. All works fully certified and legionella control log books provided.
6. Fully trained, directly employed staff.
7. Method statements and risk assessments provided site specific.
8. Cleaning to ensure compliance with current health and safety regulations.
9. Training for your own staff following risk assessment.

If your other contacts don't measure up, call Swiftclean at 01702 531221 to get the advice you need. And breathe easy.