

Solid fuel - 1996

Solid fuel appliances seem to cause more deaths per user than gas powered ones. One of the reasons is perhaps that while a gas appliance usually stays on after a death, an appliance powered by solid fuel may just burn out so that when the dead person is found, carbon monoxide (CO) is not suspected. Even in gas related CO deaths, we are sure that CO is often not suspected and it should be noted that there is no automatic testing of dead bodies for CO, even in cases of unexplained death.

Death of Edna Lawrence aged 70 in 1996

Edna died on 8th October 1996. She had lived in a Council house in a village in Hampshire. Late one evening, Edna's neighbour saw the curtains open, the lights off but the TV on, so went to investigate. He turned the lights on and found Edna dead in a chair. An ambulance was called. Edna's death was initially recorded as heart attack.

Edna had had five children, three daughters and two sons. All five gathered next door and were eventually allowed in. Edna was still in the chair and the police were present. Eventually Edna was taken away. Sue and her husband left about 4.00 a.m. leaving just June in the house overnight.

The next morning at about 7.30 am. Sue went to check on June at the house and couldn't get in. She looked through the window and saw June collapsed in a chair. Sue kept banging on the door. She then got a ladder from next door. Sue's daughter arrived and she went up the ladder, opened an upstairs window, got in and opened the front door. June slowly revived. Sue called the ambulance.

Edna's tablets were on the sideboard and the assumption was made that June had taken an overdose, which Sue strongly disputed. The ambulance took June to hospital but never tested her for CO because the medics assumed June was suffering from shock after the death of her mother & checked her heart!

Edna had been to see her GP not more than ten days before her death. Edna's GP heard that she'd died of a heart attack and disputed this. At the post mortem it was found that her heart was very strong. Therefore they tested for carbon monoxide. It was then found that Edna had twice the lethal amount of CO in her blood. An investigation showed that her solid fuel appliance was emitting large amounts of carbon monoxide. The above was recounted to Stephanie Trotter by Sue.

What CO-Gas Safety learned

That CO can easily be missed. We believe that doctors tend to assume heart attack because the heart is the last organ to obviously stop working.

How to prevent similar deaths happening

The family never really learned why the solid fuel appliance emitted so much CO that it killed Edna. It is possible that Edna went to the doctor with symptoms of CO and this was not recognised. If so, this is sadly typical. However, CO-Gas Safety thinks it best to raise awareness of CO amongst the whole public generally, not just medics and has been lobbying for a PR campaign, including prime time TV warnings since 1995.

There is also a need to raise awareness that solid fuel appliances need to be installed by properly qualified installers, regularly maintained, with good ventilation and an efficient chimney or flue which must be regularly swept according to manufacturer's instructions.

An alarm to EN 50291 purchased from a reputable supplier should be installed as an extra safeguard.

What CO-Gas Safety has done The charity has lobbied for:-

- raised awareness & for CO alarms to EN 50291
- for installers of solid fuel/oil appliances to be registered by law
- for better training of medics and installers and
- for compulsory public liability insurance for all installers. © Copyright CO-Gas Safety

