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Signage on Decontamination Unit Doors

A Decontamination Unit (DCU) used for asbestos removal works is a potentially contaminated facility, acknowledged by the requirement for it to be air tested prior to removal from a site where it has been used in the decontamination process.

Despite engineering controls (e.g. air flow and filtration) and strict decontamination procedures, there may be a residual risk such that employees and others need to be warned, and informed, of any further measures necessary. Safety signs are needed if they will help to reduce this residual risk.

A DCU has 4 doors, often described as:

1. external clean end door
2. clean end to shower door
3. shower to dirty end door
4. external dirty end door

It has long been established that the outside of the external clean end door will clearly display the word "CLEAN" or the phrase "CLEAN END".

Similarly, the outside of the external dirty end door will clearly display the word "DIRTY" or the phrase "DIRTY END".

Access to the DCU should be restricted to authorised persons only, normally competent employees of the asbestos removal company, and sometimes subcontractors working under their direction (e.g. analyst, licensed scaffolder). All sections of the DCU should have restricted access, including the clean end, which although should never become contaminated with asbestos, does contain non-asbestos hazards and risks (e.g. live electricity, access to gas boiler, etc) as well as being a storage area for personal belongings, RPE etc. Consequently, the outside of both the external clean end door and the external dirty end door should display signage to prohibit access to unauthorised persons. The most appropriate sign for this purpose detailed in the HSE guidance on the Health and Safety (Safety Signs and Signals) Regulations 1996 is as follows:



However, some signs are less appropriate than that shown above, for example, some DCU's are supplied with signage which, according to the HSE guidance on the Health and Safety (Safety

Signs and Signals) Regulations 1996, means “No access to pedestrians”. This is clearly less correct than the “No access to unauthorised persons” signage described previously. In addition, the HSE’s Licensed Contractors’ Guide is inconsistent and confusing in its illustrations of DCU signage, which includes the “no access to pedestrians” signage as well as several omissions.

Under normal operating conditions, specific personal protective equipment (PPE) should be worn when entering either the shower compartment or the dirty end of the DCU. This would consist of safety overalls and respiratory protective equipment. Accordingly, warning signs should be displayed on all doors providing direct access to these areas, namely the clean to shower door (clean side) and the external dirty end door (outside). The following mandatory signs should be displayed on these doors:



Small differences in pictograms are considered acceptable, as are slight variations in the wording of the accompanying text, provided the requirement remains the same.

Summary

The minimum requirement for the outside of the external dirty end door is illustrated as follows, and usually is displayed in this format:



The external clean end door should display the “clean end” and the “no access to unauthorised persons” signs on the outside (but not the two mandatory PPE signs).

The clean end to shower door (clean side) should display the two mandatory (blue and white signs) relating to overalls and masks. These mandatory signs are sometimes (less appropriately) displayed on the outside of the external clean end door. While it is not technically incorrect to give an advanced warning of potential hazards and risks by displaying these signs on the external clean end door, this can give rise to conflicting messages, i.e. these signs will never be complied with at this point, and may be viewed by third parties as a blatant disregard for health and safety, raising questions about other health and safety issues.

The signage outlined above should be viewed as a minimum requirement for all DCU's.

Additional signage may sometimes be displayed, such as signage to prohibit smoking, eating and drinking in the DCU, as well as signage prohibiting towels being taken beyond the clean to shower door. These should be considered as optional, and if the risk assessment deems the risks as insignificant, then there is no need to provide a sign. Similarly, some DCU's display the respirator sign on the shower to dirty end door on the dirty side to remind operatives to keep their mask on when passing through the doorway to the shower compartment. Furthermore, there may be additional signage unrelated to the decontamination process, such as regarding the electrics, gas boiler etc, for which the appropriate signage should also be displayed.