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To  
All HSE Professional Staff

### POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

This OC alerts professional staff to the possibility of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) being present in persons interviewed following a major incident/accident; and gives advice on how to deal with this.

1 The essential feature of PTSD is the development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience (ie outside the range of such common experiences as simple bereavement, chronic illness, business losses, and marital conflict). The stressor producing this syndrome would be markedly distressing to almost anyone, and is usually experienced with intense fear, terror, and helplessness. The characteristic symptoms involve re-experiencing the traumatic event; avoidance of stimuli associated with the event; numbing of general responsiveness, and increased arousal eg difficulty falling asleep, staying awake, irritability or outbursts of anger. The diagnosis is not made if the disturbance lasts less than one month.

2 The following types of PTSD can be identified:

- 1) **acute** - arising between 6 weeks and 6 months after the incident and running a course of less than 6 months;
- 2) **chronic** - where problems continue for more than 6 months; and
- 3) **delayed** - where the onset is delayed more than 6 months after the event.

The [appendix](#) gives a list of factors that may lead inspectors to suspect that PTSD is present.

3 An individual's capacity to cope with, and react to, traumatic events varies widely and suspected PTSD should not be viewed negatively by inspectors. Caution will be needed to balance the statutory duty to respond to interviewing with a sympathetic approach to the interviewee.

4 It is not intended that inspectors should enquire about symptoms but such symptoms may be mentioned by the interviewee. Inspectors should be aware that re-experiencing of trauma could be triggered by the interview and should have regard for this when collecting evidence following a major workplace accident. PTSD may also have a bearing on the individual's ability to act as a creditable and reliable witness.

5 Not all individuals involved in a traumatic incident will suffer health problems as described.

6 If inspectors suspect that PTSD may be present then the person concerned should be advised to seek medical advice, for example from their GP or an occupational health service. EMAS may be contacted to advise on referral procedures.

15 December 1994

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### **ASI headings**

Accidents: accident investigations: declarations and statements: investigation(s): post traumatic stress disorder: witness(es).

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### **APPENDIX (para 2)**

#### **FACTORS INDICATIVE OF POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER**

The following factors may lead inspectors to suspect that PTSD may be present.

1 Demeanor - the interviewee may appear unduly apprehensive.

2 Existence of a recognisable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms in almost everyone.

3 Re-experiencing of the trauma by at least one of the following:

1) recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event;

2) recurrent dreams or nightmares of the event;

3) sudden acting or feeling as if the traumatic event was recurring because of an association, an environmental stimulus or similar type stimulus.

4 Numbing of responsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the external world beginning some time after the trauma as shown by at least one of the following:

- 1) markedly diminished interest in one or more significant activities.
- 2) feeling of detachment or estrangement from others. There may be exaggerated anger/suspicion.

5 At least 2 of the following symptoms that were not present before the trauma:

- 1) hyper-alertness or exaggerated startle response;
- 2) sleep disturbance;
- 3) guilt about surviving when others have not, or about behaviour required for survival;
- 4) memory impairment or trouble concentrating;
- 5) avoidance of activities that arouse recollection of the traumatic event;
- 6) intensification of symptoms by exposure to events that symbolise or resemble the traumatic event;
- 7) episodes of spontaneous weeping.

6 Symptoms must be present for at least one month.

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