

Safety and health alert

16/98 Work in confined spaces

Incident

On 9 October 1998 in Kwinana, a welder was overcome when he entered a 750mm-pipe fabrication where Argon had been used to create a gas shield behind an external weld zone. A second worker also encountered difficulties when he went to assist after the alarm was raised by an observer.

The pipe fabrication in question was several metres long and one section had been dammed and flooded with Argon gas. Upon completion of the welding the dams were vented and the Argon expelled from the weld area. The welder then entered the pipe to remove the dams, unaware that the expelled Argon had accumulated in another section of the fabrication.

Factors

Failure to implement established Confined Space Procedures, despite the need for an observer being recognised.

If appropriate procedures had been implemented, then:

- (a) a risk assessment, that would have identified the potential hazards and the appropriate control measures, would have been completed prior to work commencing;
- (b) appropriate equipment would have been provided to test and monitor the internal atmosphere prior to any attempt to enter;
- (c) employees would have been aware of the action to be taken in the event of an emergency, that would have eliminated exposure to risk of injury to the person who went to the assistance of the welder.

Recommendations

It is recommended that where there is any likelihood of confined spaces entry being necessary, then a Confined Spaces Procedure be developed and all staff that may be in any way associated with that work be made aware of its requirements and trained accordingly.

When developing a Confined Spaces Procedure, the requirements, of Australian Standard AS 2865-1995 "Safe working in a confined space" should be used as a guide to the minimum requirements.

Further Information

Further information can be obtained from the WorkSafe internet site www.worksafe.wa.gov.au, or by contacting customer service on 1300 307 877 or email: safety@docep.wa.gov.au.

