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Editorial

Control Banding Workshop, 4–5 November 2002, London

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The control of chemical risks in the workplace remains a major concern. We know more than ever before of the serious harm that some substances can cause; whereas many pose no great threat and can readily be controlled. How, then, to differentiate between them, and, having done so, how to share this practical control advice in a way that will be helpful to those that need it? One approach is that of control banding.

The concept is simple. Group together substances of similar hazard or degree of concern and relate them to practical process and management controls that are regarded as providing sufficient protection to the worker. By this means, good industry practice can be widely shared and the user should have a degree of confidence in the solution.

This treatment was piloted in the UK, as COSHH Essentials, where it meshed well with the legal structure that provides a generic framework for protecting the health of workers from chemicals in the workplace. It offers advantages in meeting the needs expressed by small businesses. They want cost-effective, practical advice—not information that they cannot convert into action. Much of the workforce is in micro-enterprises, with fewer than five employees, and in the UK we are gaining a better understanding of their needs.

- Micro-businesses are not simply small versions of big businesses. They cannot have the health and safety assessment skills that can be afforded by businesses employing hundreds, which are often the producer of the chemical, not the user.
- Tools, such as chemical exposure limits, may not be of practical use to them in controlling their risks.
- The culture of coming to decisions may well be different. There is great reliance for support on the supplier of the chemical.
- Exposure measurement may well be disproportionately costly, unavailable and difficult to interpret and apply in the context of the business.

The challenges we are facing in the UK are shared globally, though national circumstances differ markedly. Legal constraints vary; the infrastructure to use exposure measurement is often unavailable; the cost of measurement can be prohibitive; those with the necessary skills to convert this into real action are rare, almost everywhere. Solutions must be 'owned' and understood by the user, and practical in the context of his business in his country.

A simplification such as control banding requires many value judgements to be made. What is taken to be the area in which the generic control guidance may be used, and where expert advice should be sought, is of prime importance. The constraints that apply by virtue of national laws must be met. What is a practical solution in one country may not be suitable in another. The extent to which there is a health surveillance system that can limit unforeseen adverse effects will vary. In short, the well-developed but still evolving UK system embodied in COSHH Essentials should not be adopted uncritically into other societies. A 'global' approach, setting out the principles of control banding has been produced by the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA) jointly with the International Labour Organization (ILO)—see Tischer and Scholaen, this issue, and http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/ctrl_banding/index.htm. The potential of this approach to advance practical chemical control in very many countries has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) who have combined with ILO to exploit this technique through the International Programme on Chemicals Safety (IPCS). These four organizations, together with many international experts, took part in the first International Workshop on Control Banding in London on 4–5 November

2002. The following papers were presented at that meeting and take forward the theme of a generic approach to control of chemical exposure in the workplace.

It was stressed throughout that this banding approach is to be regarded as an important additional tool to help set up sensible control systems, including personal protection, training and, sometimes, health surveillance. These systems are not panaceas, they need judgement in their use, and in many cases will advise that expert advice be sought. The approach is most certainly not a replacement for exposure measurement, interpretation, substance and company-specific control where this is needed for health protection. Working methods can often have a marked effect on exposure and override controls. Exposure may well be significant through routes other than inhalation, and schemes are being expanded to cover this. Environmental risks are also being incorporated. These systems do provide a structure to make much better use of established industry or process controls and make a reality advice that cascades through the supply chain through safety data sheets and labels. They need teaching as a technique, and limitations need to be learned. Control banding's most valuable asset of simplicity must not be lost by giving in to the temptation to over-elaborate. This Workshop hosted by the British Institute of Occupational Hygienists and BOHS, just before their merger, was the first attempt to share experiences.

As a postscript, the Workshop has already proven of great value. The control banding approach is being trialled in China and Bulgaria (both represented by their WHO Collaborating Centres) and the ILO global system (the chemical control toolkit) has been released.