

The Importance of Health and Safety in the Kitchen Environment –

Knives and Cutting

In the last edition of the e-News, we gave an overview of some of the main causes of accidents and ill health in the kitchen environment, and key steps care providers should take to ensure health and safety in their kitchens.

In this edition, we will focus on the safe use of knives in the kitchen.

Risks

The use of knives is, of course, essential to the proper running of a commercial kitchen. They are used as a matter of routine, and employees tend to be comfortable and familiar with how to use them due to their presence in the home environment. However, this familiarity can lead to complacency and a lack of understanding of the risks involved.

Unsurprisingly, the main risk posed by knives is cuts, which are said to be the second most common form of injury within a kitchen environment. According to the **HSE**, accidents involving knives generally involve cuts to the non-knife hands and fingers, but injuries to the upper part of the arm and torso do also occur.

Common accidents with knives in a kitchen environment, such as not carrying or holding a knife safely, trying to catch a knife which is dropped, or leaving a knife in a sink are often easily preventable.

However, it is important to recognise that the operation of a kitchen within a care setting can bring about additional risks, which must be factored into the risk assessment process.

This can include, for example, ensuring that vulnerable service users do not have access to knives.

The potential consequences where these additional risks are not factored in were highlighted in the joint prosecution brought by the **HSE** and **Central Bedfordshire Council** against **Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust**.

In this case a care home resident with bipolar disorder attacked two care workers using a knife he had taken from the kitchen, killing one of the care workers. The **NHS Trust** was fined **£150,000** with costs of **£326,346** for breach of section 3(1) Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974,

and the owner of the home was fined **£75,000** plus costs of **£338,996** for breach of sections 2(1) and 3(1) of the Act.

The focus of this case was on the fact that the home was not an appropriate care setting for the service user's needs, and that staff did not have appropriate training to manage his behaviour, rather than on how he obtained the knife.

However, it is unlikely that the attack would have had such serious consequences had the service user not been able to access the knife, and this case provides a stark reminder of the importance of taking a broad view of the potential risks of knives used in the kitchen environment.

Managing risks

Care providers should adopt the approach outlined in our previous article on the general importance of health and safety in the kitchen environment, namely risk assessment, control measures, training and regular review of existing arrangements.

More specifically, two key elements of the safe use of knives are ensuring safe systems of work, and ensuring safe working environments.

In terms of safe systems of work, it is crucial that employees are trained in the safe use of knives and additionally if appropriate, safe working practices when sharpening them. This includes being made aware of the different types of knife available and which is most appropriate for each task.

Basic training such as emphasis that a knife should be carried with the blade pointing downwards and that care should be given when washing up the object should also be given.

No training is too basic in this regard, as it is important not to make assumptions about how employees may be accustomed to using knives in the home, or in previous workplaces.

It is also important to be aware of behaviour that may increase the risk of injury to employees. The risk of an accident with a knife can be increased by factors such as horseplay; ignorance as to how to behave with a knife (this may be particularly true for younger members of the team who have previously had only limited experience of using sharp objects); using the incorrect type of knife for a particular job and failing to cut on a stable surface. It is also important for staff to understand they must not use knives inappropriately (for example to open post).

Things to consider when ensuring that a safe working environment is in place include looking at the floor surfaces and making sure work surfaces are kept clean, are clear from clutter and spillages, and are at a comfortable height. Employees should have adequate working space and lighting for the tasks they are carrying out. Care providers should also ensure that knives are stored safely, taking into account any additional risk factors created by the care setting, as outlined above.

Following this approach should minimise the risk of accidents occurring. However, if an accident does occur, it is important that this is **RIDDOR** reported when required, and that the circumstances are reviewed to establish whether any changes to the systems in place are required, such as additional training for staff.

Look out in future editions for tips on how to manage other key areas of risk which are providers should be aware of.

Our thanks to both
Anna Hart and
Francesca Hodgson
For this article.