

Different future has begun

Gerald Altnau on the choice of a paint stripper

Paint strippers will always be in demand – after all, before a new coat can be applied, the old paint needs to be stripped. According to a TNO report from 2000, approximately 45,000 tonnes of dichloromethane (DCM) paint strippers are produced in the EU. While dichloromethane producers continue to promote how safe their strippers are, the EU Commission's Working Committee on the Marketing and Use of Dangerous Substances and Preparations are investigating DCM paint strippers because of their high risk potential, a potential that would seem to exist: In 2003 the German Minister for Consumer Protection in Nordrhein-Westfalen audited 144 retailers and found more than half selling DCM strippers illegally, while the German Industry Insurance for the Construction Industry and the German TV channel WDR have registered more than 80 accidents in relation to DCM paint stripping, including more than 35 fatalities during the last 25 years. If DCM paint stripping is a real issue for the EU Commission – and safer stripping methods are being sought – it is incomprehensible that producers of those alternative paint strippers should be excluded from their meetings, much to the benefit of the large industry lobbies that are represented.

Regulation and education

According to regulatory bodies such as the British DEFRA, misuse by consumers is the major cause of the numerous accidents

with DCM strippers, but they are ignoring the even higher incident rate among professionals.

But who is responsible for informing both private and professional end-users, as well as retail, about the correct usage of such hazardous products? Surely this must be among the priorities of institutions and regulatory bodies, should they fail in their regulation and control of the market. The retailer in particular must have a clear understanding of their responsibility in the value chain, and how important it is to inform their customers of the associated risks of the products they are selling. I ask myself who would knowingly work with a product that not only carries the risk of death, but also requires substantial personal protection, and is 37 times more expensive than alternative products with an equivalent functionality and effectiveness? In October 2004, the European Association for Safer Coating Removal (EASCR) was formed to take a position on the EU Commission's Working Committee and to educate the market about improved safety in coating removal and cleaning processes. When companies such as Akzo Nobel, Daimler Chrysler, Sony and others already realise the danger that DCM strippers present, and start to introduce alternative technologies, it is time to accept that a different future has begun. ■



Gerald Altnau

THE AUTHOR

► Dr Gerald Altnau studied organo-metallic chemistry at the Technical University in Berlin and received his PhD in 1979. He started with DuPont in 1980 and held different positions in the Mylar polyester film before he joined the Nylon Intermediates business in 1989. Today he holds the position of Director Sales & Marketing „Invista“ Intermediates (formerly DuPont Textiles & Interiors).