

GAS SAFETY UK, CLIENT UPDATE AUGUST 2002. WHAT'S IN A STANDARD?

BJ INDUSTRIES LTD. (GAS SAFETY UK DIVISION), CLAYLANDS AVENUE, DUKERIES INDUSTRIAL ESTATE, WORKSOP, NOTTS, UK. TEL: ++ 44 (0)1909 501771. FAX: ++ 44 (0)1909 501022
Visit Us At: www.gas-safety.uk.com E-mail: david@bj-industries.co.uk

Although unscheduled, it is as a result of various recent events that the following 'Update' has been compiled. This was in an effort to bring the issues of cost, safety and the selection of gas control equipment (e.g. gas pressure reducing regulators) together.

Since we introduced gas control equipment into our portfolio we have endeavoured to put quality to the fore - this is because we believe that quality and safety (performance, reliability, etc.) go hand-in-hand. We also started out with the philosophy that our equipment must be cost-effective; sensibly and fairly priced. So all things being equal, in terms of standards, materials, pressure ratings, etc. we know how to price these goods and we know that there are suppliers 'out there' who are, by comparison, over-charging. That's life to some extent - it pays to 'shop around' and it is no major surprise that items of gas control equipment are treated as 'sundries' by many suppliers. Being outwith their core businesses, but being available from their stock list incurs a [fiscal] penalty - on a recent Laboratory Gas Safety course, one scientist remarked to me that he'd been paying roughly double our prices for his gas regulators by sourcing them from one of the fine chemical suppliers! The price of one-stop shopping?

Whilst wasting money isn't (as far as I'm aware) a safety issue. The worrying trends in this area are:

1. Equipment that is sub-standard being labelled to current standard - in order to sell the items &/or sell the items at an inflated price.
2. Cheap, sub-standard gas control equipment that has been manufactured overseas, being imported into this country and being sold on.

In my experience, both cases tend to affect the welding market more than the research or technical market. Further more, I am, however, acutely aware of the fact that many welding distributors supply laboratories with gas control equipment. Many are very competent and there are some who, sadly, are out of their depth and there are a few who have, apparently, taken their profit margin to be the sole arbiter of what they supply.

With regard to trend 1(above), this is an old problem. It's something I've seen time and again over the years. Unfortunately, the unscrupulous dealer only needs to get some labels printed and attach them to his valves and, hey presto, he's in business; old stock rated for old cylinder fill-pressures has been known to turn up looking similar to new, with labels that boast more recent standards and pressure ratings. Stock that's been written off following audit doesn't always go into the scrap - once written off it would stand on the books at zero cost and if sold on it would generate pure profit. So nothing's changed. *Caveat emptor*. You don't necessarily get what you've paid for - although you should!

The second of these 'trends' is more recent and should be of serious concern to all who are involved in the selection, specification and purchasing of gas control equipment. It is more typical in these instances for the buyer to be tempted with very low prices for regulators, gas hose and flashback arrestors that have been imported (sometimes circuitously) from the New World and the Far East.

BJ Industries imports and exports both raw materials and finished goods all over the globe. Gas Safety UK stocks items of gas control equipment and components from Germany, France the U.S.A. and so on. Throughout we have to satisfy quality standards but we also have to comply with design and performance standards. The Pressure Equipment Directive should help to harmonise things in Europe and CE marking of goods may become more widespread as a result - at the moment you'll only see CE marks on our medical gas regulators.

A recent report in one of the journals has pointed out that this issue affects, for example, lifting equipment. Apparently, increasing amounts of cheap, imported lifting equipment (hoists, slings and attachments) are being purchased in the UK: "buyers driven purely by price are putting themselves at risk by acquiring sub-standard lifting equipment". Moreover, that the presence of a CE mark does not itself protect the company concerned from legal action in the vent of equipment failure being implicated in an accident. (IEN, May

If this issue can affect work equipment as diverse as gas control equipment and lifting equipment then, presumably, this problem may be both widespread and growing.

As far as gas safety is concerned, we are aware of a recent 'situation' that's highlighted these matters where a regulator pressure gauge blew out at the user resulting in an incident and a visit from the HSE. The supplier of the item concerned, had imported the regulator from overseas and sold it on in the U.K.

A pressure gauge failure is unlikely but can be very serious. If, however, the gauges that have been fitted to the regulator are of a safety pattern type then additional protection is provided (sealed front bulkhead, blow out back, no discharge of parts upon failure). It is, not surprisingly, a requirement of ISO 2503 that pressure regulators (300 bar inlet rated) be fitted with safety pattern gauges.

The 'situation' referred to above, allegedly involved a regulator that had started life in Brazil and, whilst [apparently] quality assured it has been alleged that the item concerned wasn't designed and constructed to appropriate standards - hence the gauge failed. As far as the [sole] importer &/or UK agent of the regulators is concerned, the responsibility resides with them - the HSE wouldn't go to Brazil in order to press their case!

Whilst there is, inevitably, an element of caveat emptor in all of this, there must also be much to gain from dealing with reputable suppliers. User awareness of standards and safety policy is important as it can mean that 'appropriate questions' may be asked concerning safety prior to placing an order for gas control equipment.

AND FINALLY, IN CASE YOU MISSED IT...

From New Scientist, 27.07.02

'We hear that...

Undergraduate stupidity knows no bounds. In an attempt to impress his or her classmates, a student took a sip of liquid nitrogen to prove that it is safe. It isn't. Within two seconds, the victim had collapsed in intense pain, unable to breathe and eventually passed out. All-night surgery ensued.

"My entire upper gastrointestinal tract was badly scarred and perforated," the hapless student recounts in an anonymous letter to the journal Chemical Health & Safety (vol. 9, p. 4). "They took away part of my stomach and had my entire digestive system, top to bottom, running on machine power for a while." The expanding gas also collapsed one lung. Eight weeks later the student was discharged from hospital. A little wiser, we hope.'

Best regards, David Bayliss