

Be careful working around electricity and powerlines: WorkCover

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Businesses and workers need to be very careful when working with electricity and powerlines after recent analysis from WorkCover showed there had been two electrocutions and 14 electric shocks in a recent 12 month period.

WorkCover NSW General Manager of Work Health and Safety Division John Watson said examples from August 2012 to August 2013 have included electric shocks, through to deaths.

“In one instance a worker was installing air-conditioning at a petrol station when the wiring he was working with was still energised and he received an electric shock. Tragically, he passed away in hospital,” Mr Watson said.

“In another case, a plasterer was installing a ceiling fan when he accidentally cut through energised wiring receiving an electric shock which caused him to fall about 2.4 metres off his ladder also causing bruising.”

Mr Watson urged businesses and workers to take the steps needed to make sure everyone comes home safe at the end of their shift.

“We want all workers to return home safely to their families and friends at the end of the day,” Mr Watson said. “But sadly this is sometimes not the case.”

“Working on or near electrical installations can be dangerous, and that’s why workers and businesses need to take precautions and always use a licensed electrician for all electrical installation work.

Although all situations are different, what’s important is that there are basic ways to improve electrical safety.

“It’s so important that workers test before they touch. It sounds simple but it can be overlooked.

“Make sure you de-energise before you start work by identifying and isolating the source of electricity, and locking and tagging the switch,” he said.

“In conditions that involve exposing electrical equipment to moisture, heat, vibration, mechanical damage, corrosive chemicals and dust, ensure that that the electrical equipment is regularly tested and tagged and that the equipment is used in association with an RCD (Residual Current Device/ Safety Switch).

Mr Watson said special consideration must also be taken when working near overhead and underground powerlines.

“You don’t need to come in contact with the powerline to result in electric shock or arc flash burns. It is important that workers, equipment, material and plant remain at safe distances from overhead and underground electric lines,” Mr Watson said.

While court action is generally only used in the most significant safety breaches, Mr Watson said WorkCover can and does prosecute businesses that fail to adequately protect their workers.

“Under work health and safety laws, workplaces must have systems in place to prevent workers being shocked or electrocuted,” Mr Watson said.

WorkCover prosecuted a heavy vehicle hire and haulage company after two of its workers received electric shocks while unloading construction material underneath live powerlines.

At the time of the incident, a truck driver and a crane operator were unloading housing trusses as part of a residential construction project when the crane touched the 11,000 volt overhead powerlines which threw the crane operator from the controls.

When the truck driver ran to the controls to stop the veering crane, he also received a shock and became stuck to the controls.

The crane operator, who had recovered sufficiently, grabbed the truck driver’s shoulder to pull him free but received a second shock which again threw him to the ground.

The crane operator was finally able to pull the truck driver off the electrified controls using a crane sling as a lasso.

The crane operator suffered a heart attack, but was resuscitated on site. He also sustained severe electrical burns and part of his left foot was 'subsequently amputated'.

The truck driver sustained electrical burns.

The company was prosecuted and fined \$65,000 by the court for breaches of the Occupational Health & Safety Act 2000.

“Incidents such as this one need not occur if work is conducted in planned way that takes into account the potential risks that need to be addressed. A safety plan should be established for all work involving high risk plant including the use of safe working distances between plant and high voltage powerlines,” Mr Watson said.

“In this case two men nearly lost their lives.”

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