

‘Gauzegate’

There will, hopefully, be few if any science departments across the country that have not come across this issue. And by the time you read this it is likely that the situation will have been resolved without too much drama. But at the risk of boring you, a brief recap.

A few weeks ago it was discovered that a few samples of ceramic-centred Bunsen gauzes from two suppliers had come back with a positive test for a very low level of contamination with asbestos. HSE issued advice on what to do, mirrored by ourselves and CLEAPSS.

Perhaps the key point from this is that HSE described the risk from these gauzes as **‘extremely low’**. In fact, when discussing dust and particles that tend to rub off these gauzes in storage, they said **‘these particles and fragments do not represent an airborne risk’**.

All the suppliers then rushed to get testing done on their current stock by approved laboratories and can all now assure potential customers that any new gauzes they buy will be entirely asbestos-free.

They have been unable, however, to offer reassurance for stock purchased prior to this event. Either testing was not done or it was done overseas, in good faith, but not matching the UKAS standards required to certify them as asbestos-free.

As a result, it looks like all ceramic-centred gauzes will have to be disposed of as asbestos-containing waste. This may seem an over-reaction but the Asbestos Regulations reverse the burden of proof in this context. Once there is suspicion, then material must be assumed to contain asbestos unless it can be proven not to. In this case that is not possible and so it needs to be disposed of.

The disposal process is quite simple, is not dangerous and does not, unlike most asbestos work, require special training or equipment.

Any gauzes should be carefully double-bagged and kept for disposal by a licensed asbestos contractor. HSE say that any other gauzes in the same tray/cupboard, even if they are plain metal, should also be disposed of.



Figure 1 - Bunsen gauze (Image by NagayaS (CC BY-SA 4.0)).

Apart from these, **there is no need to dispose of any other equipment stored with the gauzes**. Tripods, Bunsens and the like should simply be wiped down with a damp cloth and the cloth disposed of along with the gauzes.

We have come across cases where contractors have been sent in by the Local Authorities and have turned up in full ‘hazmat’ suits and removed everything - in one case even the cupboard. They have clearly not read the HSE’s guidance. If this happens, refer them to the guidance here [1].

At the time of writing, early October 2018, we are aware of no more than three schools that have found contaminated gauzes. We are unable to name the suppliers: HSE have asked us not to as there may yet be criminal prosecutions and early publicity could endanger their case.

For the future, the suppliers have all had their current stock tested appropriately and will, presumably continue to do so. In order to reassure yourself when purchasing stock in the future, ask to see a copy of the test certificate. This should be from a certified UKAS accredited laboratory and will contain some variant of this symbol.



Reference

[1] <http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/wire-gauzes.htm> (3rd paragraph of the ‘What do I need to do?’ section).