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Museum Professionals Group

date: 2 February 1982

please reply to: Ulster Museum,
Botanic Gardens,
BELFAST BT9 5AB.

ref:

E.G. Hancock, B.Sc., A.M.A.,
Central Museum & Art Gallery,
Le Mans Crescent,
BOLTON BL1 1SA.

Dear Sir,

Many of your members have presumably received the circular dated 30th October 1981 from Edwards High Vacuum, Crowley, regarding the possible hazards arising from the use of azides in vacuum systems. It would appear that users of Edwards freeze driers have not been unduly perturbed by this notice, and that users of similar apparatus manufactured by firms other than Edwards High Vacuum are probably unaware of the possible dangers.

Briefly, the danger arises when azides combine with copper, bronze or brass to form unstable, explosive compounds, which can detonate spontaneously, or on impact. The question arises then, do azides occur in the fresh biological material normally processed in museums? I was disturbed when an enquiry put to the Department of Biochemistry of Queen's University, Belfast, produced the answer, yes, they do, notably in marine material.

This information seemed to come as something of a surprise to a spokesman I then contacted at Edwards works. The warning was addressed primarily to workers who introduced additional materials containing azides, apparently as a stabilizing agent, and in these circumstances detonations have occurred. No accidents have been reported in any other circumstances, even from firms who process foodstuffs in bulk for human consumption. Nevertheless, until more information becomes available about the amount of azides, in our specimens, and the levels at which they constitute a hazard, the warning cannot be ignored. The unsatisfactory position in my own institution, the Ulster Museum, is that, having informed the local Health & Safety at Work Inspectorate, and switched off our E.F.2, we must give it a wide berth, and await developments, presumably in the form of more information from Edwards research department. The firm has acted very correctly in this matter, but in spite of offering some reassurance, obviously cannot guarantee that there is no risk until further research has been carried out.

The Executive Committee of M.P.G. feels that the above information should be drawn to the attention of all preparators who may be affected, via the medium of your Newsletter.

Yours sincerely,



S. Anderson (Chairman, M.P.G.)