



# Managing Worker Health and Safety: An Auto Refinish Shop Success Story

Ask auto body shop owners what's their toughest job. The answer, nine times out of ten: getting workers to wear protective equipment. While there's no quick fix—changing behavior is always tough—this case study will show there is a solution. One person—a dedicated shop manager with clear health and safety duties and the support of the shop owner—can be the key to consistent use of protective equipment, by everyone in the shop.

The Design for the Environment (DfE) Auto Refinish Project (see sidebar below) came to this conclusion after getting to know Ed Pollitt, shop manager at AOK Auto Body, Inc. in Philadelphia, PA, and his boss, Art Kulis, the shop owner. Art asked Ed, as shop manager, to make sure the workers at AOK know the risks from auto refinishing chemicals and how to protect themselves. Ed has made it his mission to not only do his job well, but to make AOK the safest shop it can be.

This case study explains how Ed's concern about shop practices, constant vigilance, and persistent reminders have led to AOK's success in keeping its employees safe, healthy, and on the job!

## Know What's Hazardous: Material Safety Data Sheets

At AOK, one of Ed's most important duties is to review MSDSs with employees and keep the sheets organized and readily accessible. Ed routinely discusses each new product with workers. Using the MSDSs, he informs them about each product's health hazards and any protective measures recommended by the product manufacturer or supplier. "I read every MSDS, from front to back," says Ed, "This way I know all the hazards and can let the guys know. Some of the shop materials can cause blindness, nerve damage, asthma... I make sure the guys know the dangers so they protect themselves."

### Design for the Environment Auto Refinish Project

In its Auto Refinish Project, U.S. EPA's Design for the Environment (DfE) Program works with auto refinishers to identify and encourage safer, cleaner, and more efficient practices and technologies.

EPA's project team has uncovered many examples of health and safety

efficiency and can help shops save money.

If you're interested in participating or would like to learn more about this project, please write Mary Cushmac at [cushmac.mary@epa.gov](mailto:cushmac.mary@epa.gov) or David Di Fiore at [difiore.david@epa.gov](mailto:difiore.david@epa.gov), or visit the DfE web site at: [www.epa.gov/dfe/projects/auto](http://www.epa.gov/dfe/projects/auto).

For a virtual auto body shop experience, filled with helpful health, safety, and efficiency information, visit [www.ccar-greenlink.org/cshops](http://www.ccar-greenlink.org/cshops). The virtual auto body shop is a joint product of DfE and the Coordinating Committee for Auto Repair (CCAR).

Ed's health and safety strategy focuses on three key components:

- **Awareness of Hazardous Materials via Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs),**
- **Use of Protective Equipment, and**
- **Employee Training.**

To implement this strategy, Ed must manage the receipt of materials and equipment, the assessment and scheduling of shop maintenance, and workers' use of safety equipment.



*AOK Auto Body's Art Kulis and Ed Pollitt*



*Ed reviews MSDS information with all of AOK's employees*

## Be Prepared with the Right Protective Equipment

AOK maintains a safe work environment largely because all workers, painters, technicians, and helpers consistently use the protective equipment specified in the MSDS. Whether dry or wet sanding, mixing or spraying paint, the employees at AOK wear gloves and safety glasses and, when appropriate, paint suits and air purifying or supplied air respirators.

Everyone at AOK works safely because Ed supervises them and is attentive to their protective equipment needs. Ed works with the painters and technicians to select and purchase equipment that is right for them, effective, and comfortable.

### Purchase and Supply

Knowing the hazards and safeguards won't get you an ounce of protection if the equipment's not there when you need it. Among his other responsibilities, Ed is in charge of the protective equipment inventory. "I always make sure that the guys have plenty of gloves the right type and size, fresh respirator cartridges, filters—you name it—everything they need." Ed ensures that equipment and materials are in supply, good shape and working order. When they're not, he handles replacement and repair.



*Ed makes sure that AOK's employees have plenty of gloves, fresh respirator cartridges, filters—everything they need.*

### Record-Keeping

The upkeep of MSDS files might seem unimportant, but for Ed, it's a priority. As he explains, "I need to make sure I have a current MSDS for each chemical in the shop, so I can be up-to-date on the health hazards and what the guys need to wear—the right gloves, goggles, and respirators—to protect themselves."

### Monitoring Deliveries: Where's the MSDS?

Ed also supervises the receipt and storage of shop materials. As supply manager, he keeps a watchful eye to ensure that each product arrives with its MSDSs. "If a product arrives without an MSDS," Ed says, "I place it in a holding area and notify the manufacturer that we will not accept delivery until we have an MSDS. After that, it usually doesn't take long before one shows up."

This practice ensures that Ed and the auto refinishers know a new product's hazards before it is used in the shop. Ed says, "The guys usually appreciate this extra effort particularly when the MSDS identifies a hazard they weren't aware of." It also makes the supplier aware that AOK insists on being informed and will only use a product after understanding how to use it safely.

Ed also oversees new equipment purchases, working with employees and manufacturers to find gear that's appropriate and comfortable, too. It's a common sense approach. "There's no point ordering equipment without knowing if the guys like it and will wear it," Ed says. For example, before ordering new air purifying respirators, he convinced the equipment supplier to let AOK try several models over a period of a few months. "I didn't place the order," Ed recalls, "until we found a model the guys were comfortable with and that would do the job."

### Auto Body Shop Health Risks

Auto refinishers use many potentially harmful chemicals, especially during painting operations. Of particular concern are solvents, isocyanates, and paint additives. Isocyanates, for example, are the leading cause of occupational asthma. To safeguard their health, workers need to be aware of these potential hazards, wear adequate protective equipment, and receive training.

For more information on the health risks from isocyanates, see the NIOSH Alert "Preventing Asthma and Death from Diisocyanate Exposure," at [www.cdc.gov/niosh/asthma.html](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/asthma.html).

### The Art of Persuasion: Employee Training

If Ed's not checking the protective equipment, he's checking whether the workers are using the equipment properly. He's always on the lookout for lapses in safety practices. "I do have to keep reminding the guys, especially some of them, 'Put on a mask' or 'Get some gloves,' but they do it," Ed says. "They know they have to or I'll just keep bugging them."

Sometimes protective techniques are a tough sell. An extra air hose for supplied air respirators, for example, can be awkward in a spray booth. But this isn't a problem at AOK. Ed

simply explained the dangers of breathing isocyanates to the painters and told them they needed to use the equipment. Ed says, "After our painters found out what can happen if they don't use supplied air respirators, having to drag around two hoses [one for the gun and one for the respirator] was never an issue."

### **Health and Safety Program**

To comply with federal regulations, AOK has an official health and safety (H&S) program, which Ed is sure to keep up and running. As part of the program, Ed trains new employees on a wide range of H&S matters, including how to read MSDSs, communicate shop hazards, use protective equipment, and manage wastes. He also conducts periodic refresher courses for all employees.

Ed is also always on the lookout for training opportunities. For instance, he made some calls and found that his respirator manufacturer offered a free video on proper respirator use. Ed now uses this video as a main component of the respirator training required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

### **Outside Resources**

From time to time, Ed uses outside sources to help reinforce his safety message and ensure the program is up to par. For example, when the shop's insurance carrier comes to perform walk-through inspections, Ed gets all the advice he can on improving health and safety practices. (As an added bonus, some insurance companies offer discounts to shops that have an H&S program.) Ed notes, "We're paying for the insurance, we might as well take advantage of the services they provide."

### **Message to Shop Owners: Working Conditions = Job Satisfaction**

Auto body workers have something to say: Give us a shop that is clean, safe, and comfortable, with easy access to protective equipment that works and fits well, and we'll be satisfied, reliable employees. And they're saying it loud and clear, according to a recent survey of auto body technicians from around the country, as reported in *The Automotive Journal* (Yoswick, John. "Beat the Tech Shortage! Stem the Experience Exodus." July, 2000, p.18). The technicians listed working conditions and good safety equipment as their top priorities. The AJ article makes it clear that shop owners should keep in mind their technicians' concerns. One owner from Texas, quoted in the article, emphasized the need for basic proper safety equipment—safety glasses, back supports, proper respirators, protective clothing, and gloves—from the beginning of an employee's career. The survey sends a strong message to shop owners: the key to keeping technicians in the industry is to take good care of them.

### **Nothing Happens without the Owner**

Ed's the guy who makes safety a reality at AOK, but it's AOK's owner, Art Kulis, who's willing to put safety on the payroll. To match AOK's success, it's the owner who must set the tone and either be responsible for safety or assign those duties to a shop manager. "I can do this job because Art thinks it's important and good for everybody," Ed explains. Art and Ed both believe in the benefits of consistently using gloves, respirators, and other protective equipment. They know that a healthy worker is a reliable and productive employee. But beyond that, Ed says, "We care about the people who work here."

### **Safety Beyond the Shop**

AOK's strong safety ethic not only serves to protect the health of its workers, but also ensures the well-being of the surrounding community and environment. As companies that use hazardous chemicals, auto body shops have an obligation to keep their workers and the public informed about the chemicals in use and their possible health or environmental hazards. The careful and efficient use, handling, and disposal of chemicals in any shop is good for business and the environment.

### **Take Advantage of Outside Resources**

Many equipment manufacturers offer free training materials. In many cases, protective **equipment** manufacturers, jobbers and suppliers, insurance carriers, and paint manufacturers and distributors offer free services or resources that can help educate workers. **Call** the representatives **that** service your shop to see how they can help you.



*A dedicated shop manager with clear health and safety duties, like Ed Pollitt, can be the key to consistent use of protective equipment by everyone in the shop.*