



# Hazards in Commercial Domestic Cleaning

## Background

The domestic cleaning market in the UK is estimated to be worth nearly £3 billion, with more than 2.45 million households using some form of paid assistance in their home<sup>1</sup>. It is highly likely that these figures seriously underestimate the true extent of the breadth of the market.

Since a significant proportion of the domestic cleaning market is comprised of small family-run sole traders or individual self-employed persons for tax purposes, there may not be any reliable numbers of persons actually engaged in domestic cleaning tasks. Now we come to the core problem of this very substantial market.

While the larger operators tend to employ cleaners through a local franchise network, and are therefore subject to the usual health and safety requirements under the law, it is the significant number of smaller operators which are not employing people, but adopt a 'quasi-employed' status of the cleaners, whereby the cleaners are technically self-employed, but the business owners set the rates, conditions, practices and handle sales; while the cleaners themselves provide the labour and have to ensure their own safe working practices. The justification for this status is clearly a tax issue, but it could be considered to be an attempt to abdicate direct responsibility for any potential health and safety issues. For example, cleaners are asked to supply their own gloves and told to make their own provision for their safety.

Our own research has shown that the situation is that cleaners are provided with no or little training in cleaning and health and safety issues before starting, this means that the cleaners are not aware that a customer's home is a working site, and without adequate training in assessing risk, often expose themselves (or their subcontracted staff) to unnecessary risk. Study after study have shown that the level of health problems reported by cleaners is high compared to other occupations<sup>2</sup>, but that's just the reported problems. It is expected to be higher still when you add the likely unreported instances.

We are familiar with our own homes, and if we are honest, we really don't consider the hazards that could be present. There is a disconnect between what we consider a safety risk in our own homes with that of a place of work, even the humble office is elevated higher than the home. Yet, the home to a complete stranger presents a wider and more unpredictable range of hazards than an office. Now, imagine you are a cleaner who has four houses to clean every day, 5 days a week, that's 20 potentially different work-sites, but more importantly 20 potentially different and unknown health and safety situations.

This may sound a touch alarming, but consider the fact that every home is very different and individual, and every home owner has a different attitude to health and safety. Now consider a cleaner – a complete stranger to the home – coming in unaware of a range of hazards that the homeowner has no appreciation or inclination of the severity of the hazards.

Hazards like broken glass, infection, household chemicals, poorly or damaged fittings, animals or damaged electrical cleaning appliances.

It's not just the cleaner being unaware of the potential hazards, but they may not know how to assess the potential risks. Management may also be unaware of any potential problems.

### **Hazards**

#### ***So, what hazards is a domestic cleaner likely to find?***

There are three broad categories of hazards: Physical, Chemical and Infection. Physical hazards include falls, trips, slips, musculoskeletal problems, sharp edges on glass, metal and other sharp objects, but also puncture wounds from needles and burns from hot objects and corrosive chemicals. Chemical hazards include irritating and toxic gases from chemical reactions as result of a number of different popular domestic cleaning products coming in contact with each other, energetic reactions producing hot gases which are breathed in or impact the face, or internal injuries from breathing in corrosive sprays. Infection hazards include handling infected human or animal wastes and bodily fluids, wastes from pests, blood-contaminated items (plasters, bandages, needles), contaminated food products and mould.

### **On the other side**

Each hazard from one of the three categories could be introduced into the home by a cleaner, by being not aware of the hazards posed to the household. For example, a cleaner could be recovering from a Gastrointestinal infection (food poisoning), be feeling ok and yet still be infectious. This cleaner could unwittingly introduce that infection into the household through poor personal hygiene. This is especially critical if there are any members of the household that are more vulnerable to infections through chronic illness or infirmity.

In another example, a cleaner could have inadvertently damaged the cable or plug of a vacuum cleaner through carelessness and thereby introducing a potential physical hazard to the household when they come to use the equipment. In another example, a cleaner uses a common descaling toilet cleaner to clean the toilet bowl, unaware that bleach has been used by the household. The act of mixing the two produces toxic Chlorine gas on contact resulting in potentially severe inhalation injuries.

### **Understanding and Managing Risk**

#### ***Fundamentally, it takes knowledge to determine the nature and severity of the risks***

Clearly a sense of proportion is needed – the potential hazards are there, but it is the awareness and the knowledge in how to assess the risks that are absent, and that is the key point to make.

The first step in preventing those hazards posing a risk by causing an injury is to know what those risks are, how serious they are and who is likely to be exposed to them. This process is a risk assessment and its job is to determine what measures must be put in place in order to minimise the risks identified. This is a legal responsibility for employers to undertake for their activities, but for self-employed people and smaller operators with less than 5 employees it's not required to have a formal assessment written down, but doesn't mitigate the risk nor protect the cleaners. It can be argued that a proper understanding and assessment of the risks involved is both the right course of action and a preventative measure to avert costly problems from arising, like absenteeism, litigation and other disputes.

In the light of recent cases, this issue of 'quasi-employed' status is likely to highlight the commercial domestic cleaning practices.

### **References**

1, *Source from Molly Maid -*

<http://www.thefranchisemagazine.net/page/molly-maid-uk-ltd/domestic-cleaning-market-in-uk-an-overview.php>

2, 'Caring for cleaners: Guidance and case studies on how to prevent musculoskeletal disorders', pg 5, HSE book HSG234, [www.hse.gov.uk/pUbns/priced/hsg234.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pUbns/priced/hsg234.pdf)



**Futureclean Assured Systems** are a complete cleaning system is a combination of many different parts that must work together seamlessly. Some of these parts, like training, are often not considered to be important, but without all the parts working together the cleaning standards deteriorate.

Futureclean Assured Systems can advise and assist on all aspects of cleaning and facilities management, below is a list of services we offer:

**Advisory Services** including: Auditing, Gap Analysis, Risk and Safety Management, Specifications & Manuals, Design & Development and Specialist & Unique Cleaning Systems

**Support Services** including: Facilities Management, Marine & Environmental Consultancy, Food hygiene and Safety, Infection Control, Hospitality, Industrial & Construction Cleaning and Technical & Process Cleaning

**Training Services** including: Online, On-site, Practical, Auditing existing training, Custom Course Development and Training the Trainer.

**Research & Development** including: Cleaning Practices, Cleaning Products, Protocols & Standardised Testing, Cleaning Systems and Hazards & Risks in Cleaning.

Our in-house cleaning experts have proven track records, with decades of practical and managerial experience at the highest level, in delivering many various answers to cleaning problems in many different industries.

No matter how complex or how intractable the problems are, Futureclean Assured Systems will assure you complete confidence in our ability to support you every step of the way, and beyond with our commitment to on-going support.

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