

ARTICLE DISPLAY

Order from chaos

By Amy Eagle

MSDS management systems help facilities stay on top of need-to-know info

Total chaos. That's how John Collins, assistant operations manager for environmental services at Lourdes Memorial Hospital, Binghamton, N.Y., described his facility's prior management system for material safety data sheets (MSDSs).

"It was just total chaos. The purchasing department was trying to maintain a copy of everything in existence, with each department keeping hard copies of their own individual chemicals," he says. "Even to try to keep it in some kind of alphabetical order ... was just beyond human ability."

Unfortunately, this situation is very common. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations require facilities to obtain an MSDS for each chemical they purchase, and to keep records of employees' chemical exposure for 30 years. Storing this information in an organized fashion demands a huge investment in time, energy and space. And even when stored properly, MSDSs are difficult to read, which may delay a quick response in the case of a spill or accident.

To overcome these problems, many health care facilities, including Lourdes Memorial Hospital, are turning to computerized MSDS management systems.

These systems make storing and locating MSDSs simpler, either through granting access to a software manufacturer's database, creating a database specifically for the institution, or both.

Users can look up an MSDS a number of ways, such as by product name, manufacturer, chemical abstracts service (CAS) registry number, or chemical. Many software companies will inventory a facility's chemicals; some have readymade databases of chemicals commonly used in health care. Additionally, one company provides simplified, easy-to-read safety information along with an MSDS database.

While OSHA requires that the original MSDS be kept for backup purposes, a digital MSDS management system can allow for immediate access to safety information where it is needed at a moment's notice.

'Definitely worth it'

Virginia Willard, R.N., associate director of materials management for Baptist Health Care in Pensacola, Fla., uses the MAXCOM Workplace Chemical Safety System by Tucson, Ariz.-based MC Technologies (www.maxcomonline.com) to manage her MSDS information.

This system not only provides software to manage an online MSDS database, it also furnishes easy-to-read Safe Use Guides to help workers use chemicals safely. There are 36 Safe Use Guides; chemists at MAXCOM analyze products to determine which guide applies to each.

Willard explains how the system works, using the example of a worker accidentally squirting Windex in his or her eyes: "They can go to their MAXCOM manual, look in the index under 'Windex,' and it immediately gives them the Safe Use Guide number. Then they can turn [to that Safe Use Guide] in the very same book ... and it says what they need to do if they squirt it in their eye," she says.

"If you have an accident, you want to be able to get to that information very quickly ... and understand it once you get there. You couldn't do that with MSDS sheets," says Willard.

Willard not only appreciates how easy the system is to use, she liked how easy it was to set up. "We had 28 two-inch binders full of MSDS sheets in some kind of order that I could never figure out," she adds. "We sent all those to MAXCOM. They did the research, put them in a Safe Use Guide, [and] sent us back books with a summary sheet attached to each MSDS sheet. Just awesome."

The system has also made the inspection process easier for Baptist Health Care. "It certainly has assisted us when we've had our inspections," says Willard.

Crucial to ES employees

The availability of safe handling information is crucial to environmental services employees who use many chemicals in the course of their work.

As the hospitals profiled here have demonstrated, MSDS management systems can improve worker safety by providing MSDS information when and where it is needed. And, it eases the burden of maintaining bulky and often overwhelming files, which can be a hindrance when time is of the essence.

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