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Contractor Fall from Height Accident

The Incident

On 16 January, a 67 year old contractor fell from a ladder whilst entering a Hydro Pulper at M-real's Kemsley Mill in Kent. While in this particular case, it is not possible to ascertain with certainty the exact cause of the accident, there are some lessons to be learnt and some reasonably practical measures which companies can take to reduce its possibility.

Background Information

There had been problems for some time with the plates at the base of Hydro Pulper No 1, and several modifications had already been completed. A new plate had been ordered and it was decided to shut the pulper prior to its arrival to allow for its replacement.

The Hydro pulper is 6.2 metres wide by 3.6 metres deep. The base of the pulper is disc-shaped with a 10mm metal grating over. It has an access hatch to the rear for cleaning and venting any noxious gases, with an inspection hatch at the top edge and two large plates on top to be removed (by crane) for access.

The activity had taken place on numerous previous occasions with no incident. A risk assessment had been carried out, but everyone was so familiar with it that it wasn't discussed in depth with those doing the job.

Details of the incident

On the day of the accident the mill had arranged for two contractors to be in attendance to start the work. Both were regular contractors who were well known and respected within the mill. There is a company system in place to record safety passports and induction records.

A three section ladder was used (as previously) and it was tied back to a nearby stanchion. The overlap of the ladder was strapped to improve stability. The first contractor went down to the bottom of the pulper and began assessing the work. The second contractor stepped onto the ladder and began his descent – and then fell.

At the time of the accident the injured contractor was taken by air ambulance to hospital but appeared to be recovering well, although badly bruised. He has now been diagnosed as suffering from post trauma amnesia, and tells the HSE that he is confused and very sleepy

Company Action

Following the accident and upon further investigation M-real has undertaken the following actions:

- purchased a bespoke ladder for access;
- installed a purpose built gantry to one side for use as access and also as an anchor point;
- purchased a 'safe base' for the ladder, and
- purchased a davit system for rescue procedure where the area available is too confined or too small for a tripod e.g. at the hydro pulper.
- arranged refresher training in risk assessments for all mechanical maintenance staff, and
- revised the safe system of work to include and address such issues as:

1. Planning

- a. appropriateness of equipment – including means of access and egress
- b. appropriateness of staff – including whether a medical may be required in certain circumstances, or additional training
- c. only equipment required for the job to be at the site, and all equipment to be stored at the site so as not to create an additional hazard
- d. all equipment to be in date.

2. Communication

- a. all members of team to be involved with the Risk Assessment and resulting safe system of work for each job.

3. Co-ordination

- a. ensure all the above is communicated to any contractors involved.

Please consider the above accident in relation to your own company activities.

Additional Information

For further information on preventing Falls from Heights go to <http://www.hse.gov.uk/falls/index.htm>