Laundry Workers Fatality File

Laundry worker died of heat inside giant washing machine

A laundry worker died of heat exhaustion after climbing into a giant industrial washing machine to free some sheets and getting stuck, an inquest heard yesterday.

Paul Clegg, 23, was caught inside for more than two hours because other staff did not know there was an escape hatch on the 13-metre-long machine. It washed at up to 75C (167F) and had been running shortly before climbed into it on March 21.

Coroner Sheriff Payne told the Bournemouth inquest that staff called the fire brigade when it became clear their colleague was struggling to get out. Fire commander Tim Spring arrived at 9.38am when Mr. Clegg was still conscious. “I asked on three or four occasions if there was an access panel. They said there was not,” he told the inquest.

The fire crew cut through the wall of the stainless-steel machine to give Mr. Clegg oxygen, but by the time he was pulled out at 11.33am he had lost consciousness and was pronounced dead on arrival at hospital. A postmortem examination gave the cause as hyperthermia.

David Lewis, engineer on duty at Sunlight Textile Services in Bournemouth, told the inquest he had no qualifications and learned about the machine “on the job”. There was no written procedure for entering the machine, or a set time to allow it to cool first. He confirmed he was one of those unable to answer the fire commander, as he had not known there was an escape hatch.

Questioned by Christopher Orchard, the solicitor representing Mr. Clegg’s family, Mr. Lewis said there was a manual, but he had not read it and had never been asked to do so.

Laundry worker Jamie Woodford told the inquest he too had entered the machine, and realised Mr. Clegg was in trouble when he shouted: “Get me out, I’m stuck.”

Mr. Woodford shouted to colleagues outside, and eventually made his way back to raise the alarm. He knew nothing of an access panel close to where Mr. Clegg collapsed.

The laundry’s chief engineer, Jim McGuirk, on a health and safety committee which met monthly, told the inquest jurors, to gasps from Mr. Clegg’s family, that he, too, did not know of any access panel.