Worker Dies While Cleaning a Vat

Late in the afternoon, a worker at a manufacturing company was requested to clean out a vat. It was approximately 5 feet deep and 5 feet in diameter. He was instructed to use 1,1,1 – Trichloroethane to do the cleaning.

When he did not return home from work that evening, his wife telephoned a relative who also worked at the same company. The missing worker was found lying on his back at the bottom of the vat. He was wearing rubber gloves, work boots and a respirator, but not one which would have prevented the inhalation of toxic vapors. It was also noted that there was no escape ladder for the vat. The victim was observed three times while cleaning the vat, but no one was assigned to check on a regular basis.

During the inquest the witnesses stated there was quite a bit of confusion over which type of respirator they should use for certain hazards. It was also stated there were no clearly posted safety instructions on or near the vat.

This worker obviously tried to protect himself by wearing a respirator, boots and gloves. Unfortunately, he made the wrong choice of respirator. Regular safety training which addresses these and other concerns would have helped prevent this tragedy. Also, a buddy system or a regular check would have ensured his safety. Confined spaces call for strict procedures, including use of the correct respiratory protection.