

METHANOL KILLS HUNDREDS BUT STILL NO SIGN OF LOCAL BANNING, SAPMA LAMENTS

The death toll from the consumption of methanol is mounting globally while South Africa still has not implemented long-promised legislation against the use of the deadly substance in paint thinners, says Deryck Spence, executive director of the SA Paint Manufacturers Association (SAPMA).

Spence says Noluzuko Gwayi, Senior Policy Advisor (Director), International Chemicals and Waste Cooperation of the Department of Environmental Affairs, almost a year ago stated categorically that the government was no longer going to tolerate methanol in thinners – and offenders would face prison sentences of up to 10 years or heavy fines.

Speaking at the Coatings for Africa symposium in May 2018, Gwayi said the draft amendment for the Hazardous Substances Act would decree that the level of lead in paint - previously legislated at 600ppm – would be dropped to 90ppm to fall in line with international standards. A socio-economic impact assessment study (SEIAS) was already underway and the amendment affecting both lead and methanol levels was likely to be promulgated soon, Gwayi promised.

Spence says despite this assurance there has been no noticeable further development to expedite the change in the Hazardous Substances Act. “SAPMA has now for three years tried to ban the use of methanol in paint thinners. The government should take note of the devastating loss of life experienced in the rest of the world by methanol. It is very likely that illicit liquor is also being produced in South Africa and that unreported methanol deaths are already happening,” he stated.

India has a thriving moonshine industry, and methanol-tainted illicit liquor has killed over 2,000 people in the last three decades. In 2015, more than 100 people died in a Mumbai slum after drinking moonshine. In February this year, at least 99 died and scores were admitted to hospital in northern India after drinking toxic methanol alcohol. In Europe, also, methanol-laced alcohol has been killing hundreds of people annually with countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia and Poland particularly involved in fighting a booming bootlegging industry which relies heavily on methanol for its deadly product mix.

Spence says these statistics should be of deep concern to the SA government. “The Department of Health some time ago announced that methanol had undergone the necessary Socio-economic Impact Assessment (SEIAS) study and legislation for its banning was with the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation for approval. This gave SAPMA hope that methanol would soon be eradicated from South African retail shelves - but we are still awaiting any meaningful action,” he adds.

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