

Major injury suffered in confined space incident

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An incident has been brought to IMCA's attention in which a person suffered severe brain damage as a result of entering a confined space to read a water meter.

What happened?

He had not used his equipment to check whether the atmosphere in the chamber was safe, which was later measured as containing six percent oxygen.

Two water meter readers attended a water meter chamber some 1.8 metres deep to carry out a 'routine' meter reading. They had carried out an atmosphere check using a single channel oxygen gas monitor of the previous chamber and as the atmosphere for this was found to be ok, they assumed that the existing chamber was also suitable for entry and did not carry out a gas check. The first meter reader entered the chamber and the second meter reader was distracted for approximately ten seconds and when he next looked into the chamber he observed his colleague slumped unconscious at the bottom.

The second meter reader then immediately entered the chamber to rescue his colleague, but had to exit quickly as he was unable to breathe. After failing to rescue him a second time he raised the alarm at a nearby farm. The emergency services arrived after 15 minutes and pulled the meter reader out. They attempted to resuscitate him at the scene and en route to hospital. Despite this and specialist re-oxygenation therapy in a hyperbaric chamber, the employee suffered severe brain damage which is likely to prevent him from working for the rest of his life. He had been unconscious for approximately 15 minutes in what was later measured as an atmosphere containing six percent oxygen.

Investigations into the circumstances of this tragic incident are still on-going and any further learning will be shared. This safety alert highlights the dangers associated with confined spaces and the critical importance of following appropriate confined space entry and rescue procedures and to always use relevant equipment.

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