OSHA's Hazard Communication (HazCom) and Laboratory (Chemical Hygiene) Standards requires an employer to secure a material safety data sheet or MSDS when purchasing a new chemical from a manufacturer or supplier. The employer must then make the MSDS available to the employee who will use or be exposed in some way to the chemical in the workplace. MSDSs are documents that provide information about the chemical; e.g., common and chemical name, physical properties, health hazards, reactivity information, control measures and other information.

In a school's science laboratories, MSDSs are critical to the Laboratory Standard's Chemical Hygiene Plan. Access is a priority given the fact that exposure to certain hazardous chemicals can be life threatening for both employees and students. In the spirit of the standard, teachers should keep a folder of MSDSs for chemicals being used during an experiment in the laboratory. If an accident were to occur, the teacher can simply send the person exposed to the chemical to the nurse with the MSDS. Minimally, an MSDS notebook of all chemicals used in the laboratory should be available in the science workroom or office areas.

It is recommended that school purchase orders have a printed statement noting MSDS's are required for chemicals and payment for chemicals will be withheld until MSDSs are provided. If a chemical is purchased at a local store, the MSDS needs to be secured. Consider the scenario of an employee bringing the chemical into the workplace and another employee being allergic to it. Remember that employees have the right of access to this information.

OSHA Standards require the employer to train employees each time a new chemical is introduced into the workplace environment. Chemical Hygiene Officers or safety officers are required to have documentation of such training programs. It is a good idea to include a standing agenda item on safety in writing for each department meeting. During these sessions, new chemicals and precautions can be addressed.

It would also be prudent to have other chemical reference material above and beyond the MSDSs available. OSHA compliance officers may ask to see these during inspections. The bottom line is accessibility to chemical reference information like the MSDS and training for employees when new chemicals are introduced into the workplace. Training is also required for new employees entering the workplace.

LIVE LONG AND PROSPER WITH SAFETY!

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