

DEMOLISHING UNHEALTHY PRACTICES

MARK ANTHONY VISITED NICHOLA ELVY AND FOUND HER FLEDGLING COMPANY IN GOOD HEALTH.



There is an undeniable irony in the choice of location for Building Health's new headquarters in the heart of London's Docklands. Here is a company that is building a bright and financially secure future by providing health and safety services to the demolition industry. While a short walk away, built on contaminated land, stands that monument to profligacy and short term management; the Millennium Dome.

That a company offering on-site health inspections should have stolen the show at the NFDC's 2006 Convention in Barcelona and been universally welcomed by the demolition sector speaks volumes for the industry's modern attitude to health matters. But it says even more about the determination of its founder, Nichola Elvy.

Tall, blonde and attractive, Nichola would look quite at home in any of the financial institutions with

whom she shares the rejuvenated East End waterfront. But Nichola is less fine dining on company expenses; she's more full English in an on-site canteen.

A former nurse and HSE inspector specialising on construction and demolition, Nichola is a true poacher-turned-gamekeeper who now applies her in-depth knowledge of health and safety practices and legislation to help an increasingly impressive line-up of demolition customers.

We have discovered worrying trends



Indeed, her list of customers reads like a who's who of the sector: Brown & Mason, CDC, Erith, Wring Group, Squibb & Davies, to name but a few. While Nichola concentrates on all things health-related, her partner Nick Randall brings an extensive experience in safety matters and CDM regulations, allowing Building Health to offer a broad and all-encompassing service. Key among these services is the company's Health Surveillance Package. In addition to the sight and hearing tests required by law, Building Health will check and monitor less discernible health matters such as blood pressure and body mass index, and carry out urine tests for diabetes and prostate abnormalities. Even the company's eyesight tests go well beyond the legal requirements. "In addition to the standard eye test we check things like peripheral and distance vision that are vital for a machine operator, and we check for colour blindness which is key for electricians," Nichola says. "And we see things through to the end. On numerous occasions, we have found operatives with poor eyesight. We have organised a prescription and taken them to SpecSavers and had them back at work within 24 hours." The company is also ever-mindful of what it describes as "legacy illness issues". "A number of demolition operatives have worked previously in industries such as mining, some do part-time work as nightclub DJs and some enjoy shooting as a hobby," Nick Randall says. "All of these can contribute to progressive and often severe hearing loss and it's vital that demolition companies are protected from future lawsuits suggesting they're responsible for health problems that they, in fact, inherited."



Because of their transient lifestyle, many operatives do not have a GP or even a dentist

Nichola Elvy says that the vast majority of demolition contractors are committed to providing health and safety protection for their employees although, she says, some are more committed than others. "All employees working on a Brown & Mason contract are required to wear prescription safety glasses, regardless of the risks," she continues. "Some companies' health and safety practices are very impressive; and Brown & Mason is one of the best."

Despite these fine examples, both Nichola and Nick remain concerned at the opposite end of the health and safety spectrum. "We had just completed an on-site eye a few weeks ago when an operator came to the site office with an eye injury," Nick says. "It was at this point that we discovered that the site had no safety goggles, and no eyewash. Companies are investing millions of pounds in new equipment. Surely an additional few pounds to safeguard the eyesight of the machine's operator is a sound investment?"

Building Health's biggest health concern, however, is the lifestyle of many of the site operatives within the demolition industry. "Operatives and labourers often lead a transient lifestyle, moving from one site to another, and not being in any one location for any more than a few weeks at a time," Nichola continues. "As a result, many do not have a GP or even a dentist, and their standards of general health can be very poor indeed."

Nichola cites compacted ear wax and rotten teeth as a common occurrence during her on-site health inspections, and says that one operative actually pulled a tooth from his gums to show her just how loose it was! But while these clearly nod towards a low standard of general health, they are nothing compared to some of the more severe problems the company encounters. Nichola says that high blood pressure and depression are a constant challenge and one that is considerably more difficult to cure than poor eyesight. "Far too many operatives live on a diet of fried or fast food. Many of them smoke, lots of them drink, and

obesity is quite common," she asserts. "In many cases, demolition workers tick ALL of the known health risk boxes." "Many workers are also away from home for weeks and even months at a time. They miss their families and friends and the routine of a normal home life. This can often lead to feelings of depression." Another worrying trend along demolition workers is increasing levels of drug use. "Standard health and safety regulations do not require workers to be tested for drugs but it is required as part of the Personal Track Side (PTS) regs stipulated for working on UK rail projects, and the numbers are alarming," Nick Randall says. "On a number of occasions, companies have cancelled PTS medicals at the last moment when the proposed participants admitted they were regular cannabis users and would, therefore, have failed the blood test."



Despite this, Nichola and Nick are impressed by the strides the demolition industry has made in recent years and is excited by some of the schemes and initiatives that some companies are implementing. "There was a time when site personnel required constant reminders to wear hard hats, high visibility jackets and safety footwear but these are almost second nature now," Nichola Elvy concludes. "The same will soon be said of safety goggles and hearing protection. And with pioneering companies like Brown & Mason running initiatives like their own in-house "Slimmer of the Year" competition, the demolition industry should have a healthy future."