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The Editorial Twilight Zone

Late last year, contributing editor Suzanne Shelley proposed writing a news story on dust explosions. “I’ve been gathering a lot of information on this topic, and I think it would make a good article,” she said — not to mention the fact that we should be able to get some dramatic photos to illustrate it. So, we gave her the assignment and scheduled the article to run in the March issue (pp. 8–14). She did extensive research, conducted numerous interviews, gathered supplementary material, and on Tuesday, February 5th submitted her first draft. The article cited some statistics, explained the explosion risks of handling powders, discussed the lack of adequate regulations, and outlined various types of engineering controls, such as relief vents and rupture disks.

The end of the article sent chills down my spine. She quoted Angela Blair, an investigator with the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB), who said: “I hope I’m wrong, but I have a feeling we’re overdue, based on well-documented statistics and incidence rates.” And she ended with a quote attributed to a wise old sage: “Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.” On Thursday, February 7, as I worked on the article’s draft layout, I kept coming back to those words at the end — I couldn’t get them out of my mind.

The next day, I learned of the explosion and fire at Imperial Sugar’s Dixie Crystal refinery in Georgia. Initial indications were that sugar dust was the cause of the explosion. As the March issue went to press, reports were surfacing that the facility had had a minor explosion in a dust collector three weeks earlier. We did get our dramatic photo — an aerial shot of the devastated Imperial Sugar facility — although this was not what I had in mind when we originally scheduled this uncannily prescient story.

One month after the explosion, Georgia’s Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner issued new regulations intended to improve safety for industrial workers in that state. The rules require companies that produce flammable dust in their manufacturing processes to draw up emergency plans, practice implementing the plans, and train employees in evacuation techniques. What seems to be missing is identifying the hazard and minimizing the risk in the first place.

At the federal level, U.S. Representatives John Barrow (D-Ga.) and George Miller (D-Calif.) introduced the Combustible Dust Explosion and Fire Prevention Act, which would force the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) to regulate combustible dusts.

Two AIChE entities are working on the issue of combustible dusts. The Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS) has published “Guidelines for Safe Handling of Powders and Bulk Solids,” and offers continuing education courses on the subject. Members of CCPS will soon be meeting to formulate plans for future projects in light of the increased attention the subject has been receiving. The Government Relations Committee (GRC) will also meet to discuss how it might get involved in shaping any legislation and regulations.

On p. 6 of this issue is an article about the invisible risk posed by *Legionella* (the ubiquitous bacteria that causes Legionnaires’ disease) growing in cooling towers. Water-management consultant Loraine Huchler warns that “there are dire consequences to ignoring the risk.” Let’s hope we don’t have another editorial twilight zone experience.

Cynthia Mascone
Editor-in-Chief

