

Precis Holdings fined after security officer dies of carbon monoxide poisoning

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A London construction company and a security company manager have been fined after a security officer died from carbon monoxide poisoning while on duty. Brian Sims reports.

An official statement indicates that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has prosecuted Precis Holdings Ltd and Obioma Chukwudi for their parts in the incident.

The City of London Magistrates' Court heard that 36-year-old Victor Etu was working as a security officer at Dover House on Morden Road in Mitcham. The semi-derelict building was due to be turned into a self-storage facility, with Precis Holdings Ltd managing the refurbishment.

Precis Holdings Ltd contracted Crimeforce Security Ltd (a company which has since been dissolved) to provide 24-hour security at the site. Crimeforce duly engaged Mr Etu as a self-employed security officer.

A petrol-powered electricity generator had been provided by Precis Holdings Ltd to power a portable heater and lights as there was no electricity supply to the building.

On 16 February 2008, Obioma Chukwudi (the manager of Crimeforce Security Ltd) attended the site at about 1.45 pm. He had not heard from Etu who was on the night patrol shift and had been due to call in at 6.00 am.

Etu was found lying on the floor in an office on the second storey of the building. The generator was found in another room off the same corridor.

An ambulance was called, but Etu was declared dead at the scene.

The post mortem examination stated that Etu died from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Results of the HSE investigation

The HSE investigation showed that Precis Holdings Ltd failed to take reasonable measures to ensure that, so far as was reasonably practicable, the generator provided was safe and without risk to the health of the security officers.

Chukwudi failed to take effective steps to ensure that the petrol generator provided for the use of security officers was not operated within the building, and he did not carry out or implement the findings of a risk assessment for the provision of a 24-hour security presence.

In addition, he hadn't provided Etu with appropriate information, instruction and supervision in respect of the use of the generator.

HSE Inspector Loraine Charles commented: "Mr Etu's death in such distressing circumstances would have been completely avoidable had either Precis Holdings Ltd or Mr Chukwudi given sufficient thought to the implications of putting him to work, alone, guarding this large empty building, or indeed taken effective steps to prevent the operation of the generator inside the building."

Scale of the fines

Precis Holdings Ltd of Park Lane, Westminster pleaded guilty to breaching Section 4(2) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974. The company was fined £60,000 and ordered to pay costs of £24,515.

Section 4(2) of the 1974 Act states: "It shall be the duty of each person who has, to any extent, control of premises to which this section applies or of the means of access in such premises to take such measures as it is reasonable for a person in his position to take to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the premises, available for use by persons using the premises, and any plant or substance in the premises or, as the case may be, provided for use there, is or are safe and without risks to health."

Obioma Chukwudi of Iona Crescent, Slough in Berkshire pleaded guilty to breaching Section 3(2) of the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974. He was fined £30,000 and ordered to pay costs of £15,000.

Section 3(2) of the Act states: "It shall be the duty of every self-employed person to conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that he and other persons (not being his employees) who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health or safety."