

The Signs are still a-changin'

Now the shiny new diamond-shaped labels are becoming commonplace in your laboratories, the time has come for an update on the process so far. There is still, you may be surprised to know, a long way to go. In December 2010, it became the law to label all 'substances' for sale in the EU according to the new CLP system. Old stock already labelled was allowed to be sold until June 2012.

The next stage is the labelling of 'mixtures'. This comes into force in June 2015 and existing stock can be sold until June 2017. Until then, the old CHIP labelling system can still be used (though it probably won't be). This could theoretically lead to the odd situation of the same supplier sending you in the same package copper sulphate labelled according to CLP and copper sulphate solution labelled according to CHIP - quite legally.

So where does all this leave teachers and technicians?

The answer to this is 'pretty much as you were'. The new labelling system is only mandatory for suppliers and manufacturers so, as end users, you need not, according to the law, take any notice of it. That, however, would not be good practice. The new symbols will soon start appearing in text books and exam papers as well as on bottles and jars, so your bottles and jars should really be labelled similarly. There is no need to panic, though. You don't have to have it all done by the end of the summer holidays.

If you do want to get things under way quickly then this chart shows a rough comparison between the two systems. You need to note that it is more complex than just swapping one set of symbols for similar ones but if you label according to the diagram in the interim, you won't be far wrong and can re-label as the up-to-date information appears on our website.

What effect will it have on what is taught and how it is taught?

Just because a sign has changed, that does not mean the hazard has changed. In most cases it is simply a case of lines being drawn in slightly different places, between the different degrees of flammability for example. So if the hazard has not changed, the risk has not changed and thus your risk assessment will still be valid.

It is important to mention here, however, that you cannot just blithely assume a risk assessment, once done, can be filed away and merely glanced at from time to time. As the science improves chemicals are reclassified as has always been the case. For instance, methanol is

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CLP Regulation No 1272/2009					

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now classified more severely because research shows it is uniquely harmful to humans, more so than animal studies would suggest. So you should, as a matter of good practice, check with the SSERC website from time to time to make sure your risk assessments are up to date.

What are we doing at SSERC?

It is going to be quite a long process but over the next few months you will see the entries on the SSERC website gradually being updated. To keep you up to date, there will be regular progress reports on the chemistry home page of the site.

What can you do to help?

This whole process is a big upheaval, especially for the manufacturers, and there is plenty of room for mistakes to be made. So we would ask you to keep an eye on any new deliveries and if you see some labelling that seems not to make sense, get in touch with us at SSERC and we'll investigate. The same goes if you see something odd on our website. You might find it hard to believe but we are only human and things can occasionally slip under our guard too.

The most important thing to remember, though, is that the advice about handling, storage, safety etc. is still valid and you should still follow it, irrespective of whether the classification has been updated.

Links

- 1) If you want to try to look up a chemical in the ECHA database, it can be found here <http://bit.ly/IG6C1f>.