



Safety for hock cutters



▶ BACKGROUND

Hock cutters (see right) are mechanical scissors which may be hydraulic or pneumatic and are used for cutting through the limbs or necks of carcasses. The blades tend to be very sharp to ensure a clean cut, and the pressure that they exert is very high so that bone can be easily cut. Hock cutters are intrinsically hazardous. The danger of older single hand operated hock cutters is that there is a significantly greater opportunity for accidental activation and that the design does not prevent the other hand (or arm) being in the danger zone of the tool during activation.

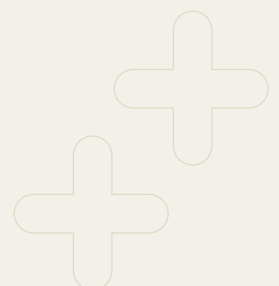
Two handed hock cutters (see right) have an activation system that requires the user to have both hands on the handles of the device in order to successfully activate it. The safest models also require simultaneous operation of the controls (anti tie-down) so that the activation system cannot easily be circumvented to allow single handed use.

▶ CIRCUMSTANCES

In August of 2001¹, the Department of Labour issued an advisory bulletin to the meat industry about the safety of hock cutters. At that time, hock cutters normally only needed one hand to activate the cutting mechanism ("single handed"), except for larger ones which could be activated by two hands ("two handed").

The advice given in 2001 regarded how to improve the guarding of single handed hock cutters, since safer technology was not readily available and not reasonably practicable in many circumstances. The Department of Labour now believes that there are significantly safer methods and equipment for cutting the hocks of carcasses than the use of single hand activated hock cutters, and so that advice no longer reflects the state of knowledge.

There has been a substantial change in the state of knowledge with regard to cutting hocks. The two major suppliers of hock cutting equipment in New Zealand, Jarvis Engineering (N.Z.) Ltd and Argus Realcold Ltd, no longer supply single handed hock cutters and do not provide support or parts for the valve systems of single handed hock cutters. This change resulted from the safety issues associated with single hand operated hock cutters in New Zealand and overseas, and from





well established and internationally recognised standards^{25,3}. There is also a trend toward elimination of manual hock cutters from plants, with the installation of automatic hock cutting machines. Due to the improving cost effectiveness of these machines, it is expected they will outmode manual hock cutters over time. The industry appears to have largely adapted to these changes in the state of knowledge, with a small proportion of businesses yet to catch up.

Despite single handed hock cutters not being available since 2003, some businesses have since modified two handed hock cutters so that they can be operated single handed, or have found ways to service older single handed hock cutters despite their discontinuation. In general, these practices demonstrate a failure to take all practicable steps to ensure the safety of workers. The Department of Labour has often overlooked these practices, because it takes time for an industry to adapt to a change in the state of knowledge. However, it has been nearly five years since single handed hock cutters left the market, and more than a decade since two handed hock cutters first became available.

Other plants have configured their chains to enable two handed operations of manual hock cutters. Carcasses are suspended to ensure that any amputated hock falls away from the carcass without touching the carcass as it falls and compromising hygiene.

GUIDANCE

The Department of Labour now considers it is time for applicable businesses to catch up with the state of knowledge and commit to the elimination of single hand operated hock cutters. For many companies change may be imminently achievable. Upon enquiry by the Department of Labour, every applicable business should be able to demonstrate their commitment to health & safety with a reasonable plan and timeline, and take all practicable steps to implement that plan according to that timeline.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR ADVICE

It is the Department's advice that applicable businesses commit to the elimination of single hand operated hock cutters.

WHICH INDUSTRIES/SECTORS OR MATTERS WILL THIS INFORMATION BE RELEVANT TO?

Agriculture, and specifically the Meat Industries.

Endnotes

1. Department of Labour (2001). *Safety for Hock Cutters*. Workplace Safety Bulletins, Occupational Safety and Health Service, Department of Labour.
2. European Commission (1989). *Annex I: ESSENTIAL HEALTH AND SAFETY REQUIREMENTS RELATING TO THE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF MACHINERY AND SAFETY COMPONENTS*. Directive 98/37/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 June 1998 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to machinery as amended by Directive 98/79/EC. Retrieved 8th January 2008 from the World Wide Web: http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/mechan_equipment/machinery/direct/dir98-37.htm#ann1
3. International Standards Organisation (2002). *ISO 13851: Safety of machinery – Two hand control devices – Functional aspects and design principles*. Retrieved 27th March 2008 from the world wide web: <http://www.standards.org.nz>

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Note: This material has been prepared using the best information available to the Department of Labour at the time of publication. Information may change over time and it may be necessary for you to obtain an update. This material is also only intended to provide general advice and does not constitute legal advice. You should make your own judgement about action you may need to take to ensure you have complied with your workplace health and safety obligations under the law.

