



## Cloth Cleaning in Domestic Washing Machines



### ▶ What happened?

A recent Department of Labour investigation has revealed an unsafe practice where a commercial cleaning company was requiring employees to take home soiled cleaning cloths (which have been used while at work for cleaning) to launder them in their domestic washing machines. In some cases these cloths may also have been pre-soaked in chemicals (such as Forward, Virex or Quat) intended to kill bacteria and viruses in the cloths.

### ▶ Investigation

This practice appears to be a relatively common in the commercial cleaning industry. However there are significant hazards associated with the industrial chemicals being used to soak the cloths. Under no circumstances should these be introduced to the home environment as some are highly alkaline and corrosive. There is also no certainty that pre-soaking cleaning cloths in chemicals will kill the viruses and bacteria which could be picked up from the surfaces that the cloths are used to clean.

This widespread practice exposes employees to risk of bringing infectious biological and chemical hazards into their homes. It has the potential to expose whole families to workplace contaminants and could cause very serious illness.

From the research the Department has undertaken and consultation with Public Health, it is clear that this practice does not meet the Australian/New Zealand standard AS/NZ 4146:2000 Laundry Practice which specifies general laundry practice requirements and makes recommendations for commercial, industrial, hospital, institutional, on-premises and coin-operated laundries. This standard sets out minimum performance requirements.

### ▶ Recommendations

1. For contaminants to be effectively eliminated the cloths are required to go through commercial washing, drying and ironing at temperatures that far exceed those in domestic washing machines. Section 3.5.1 General of the standard indicates that maintaining temperatures of 65°C for not less than 10 minutes, or 71°C for not less than 3 minutes is required to thermally treat soiled articles.

2. Generally employers need to ensure that employees who use any chemical substances at work are well trained in how to use them safely and also that they are aware of the risks and potential hazards they may pose to their health. As well as providing training detailed information such as material safety data sheets is also necessary to ensure employees are fully aware of the hazards and the appropriate controls.

3. There are significant hazards involved in the commercial cleaning industry and also risk of bringing workplace hazards into the home environment. It is the view of the Department of Labour that it is a practicable step to either safely dispose of used cloths or launder them commercially to AS/NZ 4146:2000. To comply with their duties under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 employers need to ensure that they do not require (or allow) employees to launder cleaning cloths that they have used while at work in their home laundries.

