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Ontario's electrical safety record improves, but high-risk behaviour continues

Powerline contact remains #1 cause of electrical injury and death, says Electrical Safety Authority

MISSISSAUGA, ON/October 2, 2013— Despite a 38 per cent decrease in electrical fatalities in the last five years, Ontarians continue to be injured and killed in electrical safety incidents, according to a new report released by the Electrical Safety Authority (ESA). The report notes that more than 70 per cent of all incidents occur in four areas: contact with overhead powerlines, electrical workers, the misuse of electrical products and electrical fires caused by old or faulty electrical wiring. ESA research shows there continues to be a gap between actual risk and perception of risk when it comes to these four areas.

“While it appears that Ontarians are slowly getting the message about electrical safety, far too many people are still injured and killed every year, despite knowing the risks,” said ESA Chief Public Safety Officer Scott Saint. “This isn't just about awareness. People recognize the hazards, but they think they can beat the odds. Tragically, many Ontarians find out that they can't.”

There has been a decline over the past few years in rates of electrical-related injuries and fatalities, yet incidents continue to occur in the same areas as before despite awareness. Risk perception (rather than an unexpected event, for example) drives much of that risk.

Powerline contact continues to be an area of concern, accounting for almost half of all electrical-related fatalities in the past ten years. Each year on average, three people die and five are critically injured in Ontario due to contact with overhead powerlines. While most members of the public know that a downed powerline is dangerous, the consumer surveys indicate the majority fail to consider that they may come into contact with a live wire when doing yard work and chores, like trimming trees or cleaning eavestroughs.

Leaving cooking unattended on an electric stove or failing to get older home wiring checked for problems are other common—but high-risk—misconceptions about risk that can lead to fire, injury, or even death.

Electricians continue to be critically injured on the job when working on energized electrical panels or commercial lighting systems. Research conducted by the ESA reveals that too often, electrical workers and those who hire them do not perceive these jobs to be high-risk. Some electricians end up “working live,” which is in many cases technically improper procedure – and they are paying the price.

“Electrical workers continue to be injured or killed—in some cases because they do not appreciate or have become complacent about the risk, and in others because they feel pressured by their customer or employer,” continued Saint. “We need to better understand these perceptions so we can change them. Changing people's misperceptions is critical to our goal of eliminating electrical-related deaths and injuries.”

While electrical-related fatalities have decreased, even a small number of incidents can drastically alter the current safety trend.

“Workers and members of the public must understand the risks and take proper precautions,” insisted Saint. “Vigilance is the key to safety.”

The annual Ontario Electrical Safety Report has been produced by the ESA for over a decade to provide a comprehensive assessment of electrical fatalities and incidents in Ontario. Based on information from various sources, including investigations and root-cause analysis, these data allow ESA to direct resources where they are needed and where safety challenges are greatest. The full report is available at www.esasafe.com.

The Electrical Safety Authority

The Electrical Safety Authority (ESA) is an administrative authority acting on behalf of the Government of Ontario with specific responsibilities under the Electricity Act and the Safety and Consumer Statutes Administration Act. As part of its mandate, ESA is responsible for administering regulation in four key areas: the Ontario Electrical Safety Code; licensing of Electrical Contractors and Master Electricians; electrical distribution safety; and electrical product safety.

QUICK FACTS:

- Electrical worker fatalities remain stubbornly high, with electrical tradespeople accounting for 29 per cent of electrical-related workplace fatalities from 2003 to 2012.
- Three to five people are critically injured due to contact with overhead powerlines each year. Less than a third of Ontarians see powerlines as a hazard when doing yardwork, trimming trees, or cleaning eavestroughs.
- Nearly half (49 per cent) of electrical-related fatalities in the past ten years have been utility-related electrocutions. The number of fatalities in the utility sector has not changed compared to last year.
- On average, approximately 500 house fires each year are caused by electrical wiring, panels, and other distribution equipment.
- More than 700 residential electric stove-top fires occur each year on average. The leading cause is cooking left unattended.

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