

First aid resuscitated – the new training arrangements

In the biggest change to workplace first-aid provision in more than 25 years, the HSE is introducing a new training regime under the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981. The revised structure, which comes into effect on 1 October, shortens the existing four-day First Aid at Work (FAW) course to three days and establishes a new Emergency First Aid at Work (EFAW) course within the regulatory framework. To minimise the likelihood of “skills fade”, the HSE is “strongly” recommending annual refresher training for both courses to complement current three-yearly requalification requirements.

The changes follow a comprehensive 2003–04 HSE review which looked at whether, given the substantial changes in work activities and first-aid training since 1981, the Regulations still met workplace needs. To inform the review, the HSE commissioned research into employers’ perceptions of the efficacy of the Regulations¹ and then consulted employers, first aiders and FAW training providers. Overall, the findings supported a more proportionate approach to providing competent first aiders for lower-risk premises, shorter first-aid courses, more frequent refresher training and the deployment of “basic first aiders” trained in emergency techniques.

Ringling the changes

The two most important changes in the new training regime are:

- a reduction in the length of the existing FAW course from four to three days – courses should contain at least 18 contact hours over a minimum of three days (and a maximum of 10 weeks), with each session lasting at least two hours; and
- the introduction of a new EFAW course of at least six contact hours over a minimum of one day (up to a maximum of four weeks), with each session lasting at least two hours.

The 1981 Regulations – which are unchanged – require individuals who provide first aid to injured or ill employees to have undergone:

- HSE-approved training (and received the qualification); and
- any additional training that is appropriate in the circumstances.

Employers must ensure their first aiders have a valid certificate of competence in FAW or EFAW issued by a suitable training provider. Employers will choose the appropriate course based on an assessment of their first-aid needs. As before, organisations must be HSE-approved to run FAW and EFAW requalification courses. A provider can run EFAW courses where it is already HSE-approved for FAW but, if it only wants to run EFAW courses it must get approval by a recognised awarding body of Ofqual/Scottish Qualifications Authority that is eligible to award an accredited qualification in EFAW.

Employers do not have to retrain all their first aiders after 1 October; those with a valid FAW certificate will only enter the new arrangements when their current certification expires. It is crucial, therefore, that organisations continue to train and requalify their first aiders under the old requirements up to that date, rather than waiting for the new regime to get under way.

Less theory, more practice

Describing the training changes as “very sensible”, Richard Evens, St John Ambulance director of training and marketing, says: “We have been in dialogue for seven years or so with the HSE about this – talking about making requirements clearer and updating them to meet the needs of the modern workplace and today’s training techniques. The changes will make things clearer and we strongly support that.”

The content of the new three-day course is broadly similar to the existing FAW course and Evens is confident that reducing the hours will not diminish standards. Since the Regulations came into force, he explains, protocols – for things such as CPR and casualty movement – have become shorter, making them easier to remember and to teach. This, combined with changes in educational best practice, makes it feasible to reduce the hours without losing a large part of the syllabus.

Ian Kershaw of the Federation of First Aid Training Organisations, which represents around 350 training companies, agrees, describing the new syllabus as “virtually the same” as that of the four-day course. The main change will see less

1 October marks an important day for first aid at work, reports Lucinda Ponting

emphasis on theory and more on practical application. To reduce the time, providers are rewriting their lesson plans. “Some are finding this easy,” he says, “some more difficult, largely depending on how they teach the courses now.”

Emergency first aiders

The new EFAW qualification represents a new training option within the regulatory framework for employers. “There has been a large growth in emergency first-aid-type training for appointed persons,” explains Evens. Although the statutory “appointed person” – required where a first-aid needs assessment identifies that a first aider is unnecessary – does not need any training under the Regulations, many training providers offer short courses in basic emergency first aid that are aimed at appointed persons. “A lot of larger employers ... have been sending people on these one-day courses and these people needed to be accounted for formally,” says Evens, “and that’s what the HSE has now done.”

He believes the new course offers employers – in small and larger organisations – greater flexibility. At larger, spread-out premises, such as department stores or building sites, it can be difficult to get from one place to another quickly. It can therefore make more sense, based on a risk assessment, to have an increased number of EFAW-qualified first aiders who can deal with a casualty in the short-term before a more qualified FAW-trained person arrives.

There remains no regulatory requirement for the appointed persons to have training, and employers can continue to send them on unapproved basic first-aid training. Some employers may choose, however, to send these people on EFAW courses, in which case they would formally become “first aiders”, rather than “appointed persons”, in regulatory terms.

Retraining issues

Currently, all FAW first aiders must take a two-day requalification course after three years. Under the new regime, FAW or EFAW qualified first aiders will take requalification courses at the end of their three-year certification period. Within those three years, the HSE is “strongly” recommending that these individuals also undertake annual refresher training, normally lasting at least three hours. This is not, however, a legal requirement.

“Our view is that the HSE looked at the evidence around ‘skills fade’ – which shows that key life-saving skills degrade with time – and decided it was far more beneficial to undertake a three-day course and, afterwards, three hours of annual refresher training,” explains Evens. “We

feel this is very sensible,” he adds, “as it keeps skills up to date and helps ensure that people in stressful situations feel confident enough to get involved and to use their skills.”

Although St John Ambulance strongly supports the new emphasis on refresher training, it would prefer this to be “mandatory, rather than guidance,” says Evens. Kershaw, who was head of the HSE’s first-aid approval and monitoring section from 1996–2007, is similarly disappointed. “We will have to see what develops,” he says, “but the feeling is that a lot of people won’t come back. It’s not just a cost issue; it’s also about time away from the workplace, especially for a smallish workforce in difficult economic times.”

Employers left in limbo

Although the HSE issued new guidance for training providers² in April 2009 (HSB 378 p.16), the revised L74 series publication for employers – which comprises guidance, an Approved Code of Practice and the 1981 Regulations – will not be available until 1 October, together with a revised leaflet for smaller firms. (The HSE told HSB that the delay arises from its inability to run the old and new guidance side by side.) The changes affect only the guidance element of L74³ and will include a new risk assessment table and flow chart to help employers determine the category and number of first-aid personnel to provide. A provisional version, which includes reducing the current three risk categories of “higher”, “medium” and “low”, to “low” and “higher”, is available in the consultation draft guidance⁴, but the HSE decided to reconsider the detail because consultees were concerned it did not do enough to encourage provision of first aiders in low-hazard organisations with fewer than 50 employees.

Both Evens and Kershaw are concerned at this timetable. “This is less than ideal,” says Evens. Not only does the delay make it difficult for training organisations to advise people; it also makes it tough for employers to make decisions. “It would have been better if it was all released beforehand,” he says, “to give people time to prepare.” **LP**

¹ HSE (2003), “Evaluation of the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981 and the Approved Code of Practice and guidance”, RR69, www.lexisurl.com/HSB289.

² HSE (2009), “First-aid training and qualifications for the purposes of the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981, a guide for training organisations”, www.lexisurl.com/HSB521.

³ HSE (1997), “First aid at work. The Health and safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981. Approved Code of Practice and guidance”, L74, HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 1050 0, www.lexisurl.com/HSB177.

⁴ HSE (2007) “The Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981, Approved Code of Practice and guidance (L74), draft revised guidance”, www.lexisurl.com/HSB483.

Lucinda Ponting is a regular HSB contributor.