

## ISOPA walks the talk

Due to the potentially hazardous nature of diisocyanates and other chemicals used by the polyurethanes industry, the member companies of ISOPA (the European Diisocyanate and Polyol Producers Association) have launched a proactive, industry-wide initiative to promote a culture of continuous improvement in product stewardship, in particular, the safe handling of diisocyanates. Entitled „Walk the Talk“, the initiative aims to improve health and safety standards across the polyurethanes industry in the 25 countries in the European Union by raising awareness and increasing understanding of best practice for handling these chemicals. During UTECH in Maastricht, all directors of the ISOPA member companies signed the commitment to this project. Nick Webster, Huntsman, President of ISOPA says of the initiative: “If you go back may be two or three years, each of the member companies of ISOPA had their own approach for product stewardship. But we rapidly came to the conclusion that we had to find a concerted approach. The only question was on which way to walk.”

Industry estimates suggest that the work of about 800,000 employees in 20,000 companies relates to the use of these raw materials within the EU. The industry has already spent many years developing and optimising guidelines for the safe handling of diisocyanates and other chemicals. Examples of good practice in product stewardship can be found throughout the industry. For example, ISOPA and other industry bodies have already published a wide range of guidelines and technical information which are well known across the industry. This information is targeted at the general manager or technical specialist in the industry and covers in great detail all aspects of the physical and chemical nature of the hazards of diisocyanates and how to handle them safely. The new “Walk the Talk” initiative is dedicated mainly to the people who really work with the chemicals. “It is not a question of preaching to our customers, but sharing information and

helping the workers to act safely with the chemicals”, observes Dr Uwe Hartwig, Managing Director Elastogran GmbH. Reiner Schneider, Senior Vice President BU Polyurethanes, Bayer MaterialScience and Vice President of ISOPA added: “Responsible care always was a major issue for us. Now all the global players in the EU are working proactively on that, because we, as raw material suppliers, are extremely interested that the idea of product safety finds its way to our customers in the downstream industries even more than it does now.”

ISOPA recently reviewed its approach to product stewardship using the experience gained during the MDI EU Risk Assessment and the potential challenges from REACH. Mike Jeffs, Secretary General of ISOPA, comments: “Walk the Talk is also a proactive approach to meet the upcoming REACH legislation. We want to show that our industry already cares about its products in a responsible and reasonable way. Although the MDI EU Risk Assessment showed that MDI can be handled safely in all applicati-

ons, there was a need to constantly improve the industry’s performance, in particular the efficiency of Isopa’s product stewardship activities in reaching out to the users of diisocyanates and other chemicals. REACH will create a new regulatory framework for registration and, in some cases, authorisation of the use of chemicals. REACH will not be effective, however, unless a similar emphasis is placed on product stewardship - in particular, the appropriate handling of chemicals as a route to reducing actual exposure. Thus, “Safe Use Guidance” - is becoming part of REACH as a risk reduction measure. Actions taken to reduce the risks will become part of a submission for registration”.

ISOPA member companies believe that the overriding response to these challenges should be an initiative to promote a culture of continuous improvement in the safe handling of all chemicals and, in particular, a reduction in exposure to those most directly at risk - the factory workers themselves. This response is applicable everywhere, but particularly in the 25 countries in the European Union, which will be subject to the new regulations. ■

ISOPA members after signing the panel

