



## From the President

### Can chemists help workplace safety? Moving to zero

The most important responsibility of any workplace is the safety of its employees. Put simply, every person who comes to work should expect to go home at the end of the day unaffected by workplace accidents. There has been much publicity lately about workplace safety and the death and injury rate in Australia. It turns out that farms are our most dangerous working environment, and this must be closely followed by industries that require people to drive our highways. If you stop at Tarcutta on the Hume Highway, at the halfway point between Sydney and Melbourne, there is a very simple but moving monument to truck drivers who have lost their lives on our roads. I am sure that some of these truck drivers would have been transporting chemicals or related products.

Chemistry by its very nature deals with hazardous materials and dangerous processes. Within that context the chemical and related industry has an excellent track record. I feel this is really due to the training received in the industry and our universities, stemming back to accidents that occurred earlier in our industrial history. Of course chemical industry accidents have the potential to harm more than immediate employees and this results in greater attention to safety than perhaps other industries. In my working life I have seen more and more management control and measurement of occupational health and safety. We now have full-time safety professionals employed and the first item of discussion at management meetings of all levels is a report on accidents and incidents that could have led to accidents.

Improvement in our safety record is, however, more about values and culture than it is about compliance. DuPont is regarded as the leading example of how safety should be regarded as of the utmost importance in a business. This stems from the early days in the company when black powder was manufactured on the banks of the Brandywine River in Delaware, USA. Senior company officials, and even members of the DuPont family, lived among the powder factories, where explosions were

common. This provided a great incentive to get safety right! This was further demonstrated as DuPont moved to establish chemical manufacturing plants around the company. When in the early 1930s it became apparent that workplace exposure to chemicals could cause problems, DuPont began research into industrial toxicology. Today, DuPont aims for zero accidents and even extends its duty of care into the behaviour and well being of employees outside the workplace.

Recently, I have become aware that infrastructure planning has also undergone a cultural change. Most of the focus to date has been on, for example, reducing the death rate from a serious accident. If there is an explosion or an accident in a public subway or a high-rise building the question has been one of how to minimise casualties and deaths. We are seeing now in the critical infrastructure protection debate the proposition put that we should not tolerate deaths at all; we should build our buildings, for example, in a way that lets all the people survive in the event of an accident or a fire. There should be enough life rafts on a boat for everyone!

There is no doubt that a move to zero accidents in the broader community would require a compromise of convenience. Working for DuPont requires a complete commitment to the safety values of the company, at home as well as at work. The adoption of increasing safety measures means commitment from all if it is to make a difference. How much of a compromise would we be prepared to make to reduce our road toll, for example? What if speed and alcohol limits were lowered? At the moment we are prepared to accept a level of death on our roads in return for the convenience of motor travel as we know it.

We should not be prepared to accept this in the workplace. Chemistry has an exemplary record of worker safety and is moving to zero. Chemists should help other industries by showing that a change in values and culture can make a difference. The RACI can play a role here and chemists should be aware of opportunities to help. Let's make sure our children come home from work safe and sound.

### Membership benefits: who to contact

Members seeking the financial benefits should contact the respective organisation, quoting their RACI membership number.

Professional indemnity insurance	Spencer Thomas and Partners P/L (03) 9730 2266
Retirement advice	RetireInvest 1800 635 793
Hire car discounts	Hertz Rent-a-car 13 30 39 (CDP No. 1340920)