



THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE



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AND WHY IT'S IN THE INTERESTS OF HOME IMPROVEMENT RETAILERS, MERCHANTS AND SUPPLIERS FOR THIS SILENCE TO CONTINUE.

It was in May 2019 that I was first made aware of the health issues relating to the processes involved in the manufacture of chrome and chrome related products for the global Home Improvement industry. Chrome is used in a multitude of products from taps to ironmongery from shelving to showers and from radiators to light sockets. The hexavalent chrome-plating process is used in the production of literally hundreds of millions of these products purchased every year by the UK DIY retailers and trade



19 · 4 Comments

The more we researched the issue, the more we simply couldn't believe what we were reading and discovering. The majority of retailers were purchasing chrome plated products predominantly under their own brands from Chinese factories using Hexavalent Chromium on a daily basis, but without any of the essential equipment and clothing, needed to protect workers from the risks of exposure.

Exposure to Hexavalent Chromium, whether that is inhalation of the fumes, skin contact or ingestion through food and water, causes cancer. It's both a hazardous air pollutant and a human carcinogen and the chromium plating process can release chromium in its hexavalent form into the atmosphere, which if inhaled causes several cancers but most commonly, lung cancer.

If you're interested in finding out more, please read this https://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/materials/hexavalent_chromium_508.pdf

As a context, if you remember the film Erin Brockovich, you'll know what we're referring to. In that 2000 film, Erin Brockovich played by Julia Roberts alleged the widespread contamination of drinking water with hexavalent chromium and built a successful legal case against Pacific Gas and Electric. This led to the case eventually being settled for US\$333m, the largest settlement ever paid in a direct-action lawsuit in U.S. history

A Precis of the Hexavalent Chromium Scandal

It's not that hexavalent chrome (Cr6) itself or chrome products which include it are dangerous, but the chrome plating process is toxic to unprotected operators and environmentally very damaging, if not conducted within very specific and strictly enforced conditions.

The European electroplating sector migrated to China and India many years ago when European legislation was introduced to protect operators and the environment from the many dangers posed by the electroplating process.

By far the most malignant of the dangers is the use of Cr6 in chrome plating. Cr6 is a proven carcinogenic and devastating if released into the environment, especially water courses or aquifers.

For human safety, Local Exhaust Ventilation (LEV) of plating tanks is just one component in a strict regime of safety standards in the electroplating industry, while

effluent and waste management are vital to prevent the poisonous contamination of the environment with carcinogenic discharge from plating factories.

These pictures below were taken in China in August 2019 and show part of the process of chrome plating, specifically, the use of completely open plating tanks without (LEV) Local Exhaust Ventilation, banned in the UK, but it is still permitted and remains in widespread use in both China and India.



To be clear, this is a factory whose warehouse was full of retailer own brand products destined for the UK.

In Europe this is illegal and industries such as automotive and aerospace are forced to only source chrome plated products from the EU, where the workers are protected. In the UK, the HSE has issued advice and guidance specifically to reduce the risk of exposure to hexavalent chromium, including the following - [HSE – Working with Chromium, are you at risk?](#)

Who Takes the Brunt of the Deathly Risk?

The cost of plating with Cr6 under European standards became so prohibitive with new safety standards being enforced, that producers and retailers sought out new locations where such legislation did not exist. Effectively, locations where it was acceptable for

workers to be poisoned in their work and for the environment to be contaminated with carcinogenic effluent, with China and India being the locations of choice.

Who Now Protects People and the Environment from Carcinogenic by-Products?

With global awareness of news surrounding 'cancer villages' in China and India, where their residents, men, women and children were contacting deadly cancers, the government in China began to introduce and enforce new standards for effluent management. They began to close down many geographically dispersed plating factories around cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou and in their place create clusters of platers in areas where better management was possible.

The Chinese Government enforced the installation of expensive effluent management systems, but to date, it has done nothing to legislate to ensure worker safety; this is left to factory management or local authorities to oversee.

What are the Key Motivators of Behaviour?

With huge downward cost pressure from the dominant Western DIY and trade merchants, plating factory owners have a vested interest in avoiding unnecessary cost. Worker safety and protection is generally seen as being an unnecessary and expensive cost.

A trusted UK manufacturer who is actively seeking a managed withdrawal from any Cr6 plated products told us the following story.

A government approved plating factory with an excellent effluent treatment plant was using open plating tanks for Cr6 electroplating. The negotiator for the UK company requested that workers be issued with forced air breathing apparatus to minimise the danger of exposure to the toxic fumes which the Cr6 plating process releases.

The factory owner refused.

The UK negotiator offered to pay for the purchase and maintenance of the breathing equipment and to provide worker health screening to detect any excess exposure to noxious substances.

The factory owner refused.

When pressed for an explanation, the factory owner said that to issue safety-wear or breathing apparatus or to provide any form of health screening for workers would be to alert them to the deadly dangers of their jobs. This would be a Pandora's box. It was far better to and I quote 'allow them to die in ignorance', without being able to seek compensation from the factory.

This is one half of The conspiracy of silence. The China conspiracy of silence.

The UK Conspiracy of Silence

It's a well-known quotation "*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing*" and it seems that many a good man or woman and many a good UK company have chosen to do exactly that – nothing.

The information campaign that we started in late 2019 alongside the very open knowledge that Cr6 plating is a potentially lethal process, cannot have escaped the attention of the UK's largest retailers and merchants.

With their burgeoning Sustainability departments, why would and how could, so many, so called 'responsible retailers and merchants' simply ignore the fact that hardworking men and women in China and India are knowingly and perniciously being exposed to a carcinogenic poison to merely produce shiny things for the UK market?

Maybe it is that the manufacturers, the trading companies, the global sourcing departments, the retailers, wholesalers and merchants all know that they have a factory base in China and India where much investment has been made in effluent treatment, so they don't want to affect the return on that investment. There are also the hundreds of millions of chrome plated products that the international sourcing, wholesaling and retailing companies currently buy or sell and instigate the production of, can you imagine the disruption in seeking alternatives for all those?

Maybe it really is easier and less expensive to look the other way while people are dying to make shiny things for us Westerners to adorn our homes.



What would our Consumers Think?

While it is almost inconceivable that those who serve the UK consumer could not be aware of the scandal of Cr6, it is highly likely that most consumers are unaware that people in China will have been exposed to carcinogens and risk death to make the shiny things they buy.

With such rapid information transmission and a growing awareness of human degradation of fellow humans and the environment, how long will The conspiracy of silence exist?

What makes the 'selective ignorance' surrounding Cr6 more egregious is that there are so many alternatives, better materials, less damaging and dangerous finishes, most of which are no more costly and in most cases, actually outperform chrome plating.

Those who Covert the Rose Should be willing to Grasp the Thorn

While so many companies and people are involved in the procurement and sale of Cr6 and prosper from this callous trade, how many of those who instigate the production of Cr6 plated product would go see for themselves what they are profiting from. How many would be prepared to walk around these factories with no safety equipment and

breath in the same air as those unprotected operators, knowing that just one breath can trigger cell mutation and risk respiratory cancers?

Who will end the Conspiracy of Silence?

I initially raised awareness of the widespread use of this carcinogen in two articles in the second half of 2019 and since then I have been raising the issue at the most senior level with the leading retailers.

You can read my previous articles here: -



Chrome – the shiny, silent killer.

A good friend of mine has recently taken over the reins at Rothley Limited, a long established, Midlands based manufacturer and supplier of hardware p

[linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com)



The Silent Killer is still at large

Three weeks ago, I wrote an article on LinkedIn entitled 'Chrome – the shiny, silent killer', highlighting the serious health risks associated with th

[linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com)

Not surprisingly, it's one of the fast-moving, rapidly growing, consumer focused open minded merchants with a new dynamic leadership team, who have been first to take the lead in calling-out this issue and themselves making the decision to begin the process of withdrawing from any products which have been plated with Cr6.

IronmongeryDirect have this week issued a press release which highlights the Cr6 issue and have declared their intention to begin the process of withdrawing Cr6 products from their offer.

Read the IronmongeryDirect Press Release here.



IronmongeryDirect Issue Statement Regarding Hexavalent Chromium

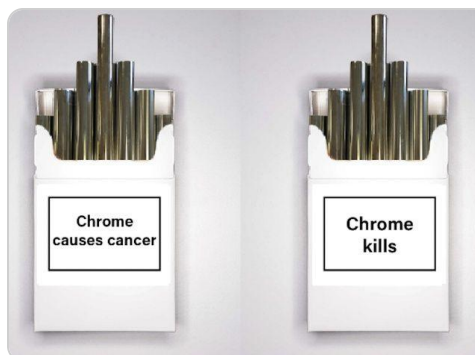
Insight DIY - DIY latest retail news, trade retailers market data and information for the home improvement and do it yourself sector

insightdiy.co.uk

As awareness builds across the Home Improvement industry, we expect other retailers to announce similar positions on the staged removal of products plated with Cr6 from their ranges. This is the only way we are going to stop this.

The Conspiracy of Silence is no longer acceptable. Today, workers will be breathing in Hexavalent Chromium fumes, they will be eating and drinking food and water contaminated with this poison and today, people will be dying to meet our need for a piece of decorative metal for our homes.

For more information on Hexavalent Chromium, read the FAQ's here.



The Risks of Hexavalent Chromium - Frequently Asked Questions

Insight DIY - DIY latest retail news, trade retailers market data and information for the home improvement and do it yourself sector

insightdiy.co.uk

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Although this article mentions some worthwhile aspects, it is an incomplete, superficial mix of questionable opinions. Some of them are arguable, some are lurid, some are simply wrong and many

aspects have been ignored.

Far from being able to answer comprehensively, we would like to give some comments from operators handling Chromium(VI) in reality on a daily basis:

1. In Europe the use of Chromium trioxide is highly regulated. Workplace limit values have to be met and risk management measures keep exposure levels below the limit of detection with standard measurement techniques. We agree that the conditions shown in the pictures are completely unacceptable and avoidable. They have to be stopped and retailers shall not be allowed to draw profit out of such poor operating conditions. However these cases have nothing in common with modern production facilities! European companies with their modern risk management measures face a significant struggle competing with the low cost and high risk production of these sub-standard facilities.

2. Electroplating using Chromium(VI) is not a simple decorative technology! Beside the appearance, the Chromium plated surface provides functions the author seems to ignore on purpose. E.g. has the author ever tried to substitute electroplated Chromium in his bathroom? What would be his choice? Gold? Plastics? Brass? Bronze? Stainless steel? Good luck with it; maybe he should ask sanitary experts for advice.

3. Huge amounts of electroplated Chromium (from Chromium(VI)) is used in functional applications. If interested the author can learn from substantial information via the web regarding applications in automotive, aerospace, engineering, medical equipment, transport systems and many many more. Substitution is in no way a decorative issue.

4. In electroplating facilities, many different articles may be coated in parallel or in series. Banning Chromium(VI) would result in thousands of articles that would have to be treated with different technologies at once while keeping all the functions. Good luck with changing the base of modern technologies that have been developed over the last 100 years.

5. It is a basic knowledge of chemistry that Chromium(VI) can easily be controlled and converted into harmless substances by easy chemical operations (e.g. in waste water treatment). This is a common standard practice in the legislation of Europe!

6. The title of the cited second article "Chrome – the shiny, silent killer" is simply wrong and begs for attention in a populist way. The same is true for the top picture which blames Chrome for cancer and death. Chrome metal is essentially inert and has no adverse effects in any way. That is why it is widely used in food and medical applications. The risk possibly caused by Chromium(VI) could only occur at work places, which is a well controlled area in Europe. Consumers will not get into contact with it.

To conclude, we would like to mention, that it is rather astonishing that so many people remember Julia Roberts in her movie role of Erin Brockovich:

It should be noted that the case documented by the movie is that of a true crime committed by criminals who did not give a damn about health, environment and legislation. To compare and contrast this with work conditions under well controlled conditions run by responsible entrepreneurs and skilled workers is reprehensible.