



The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

Promoting productive workplaces  
through safety and health research



# Tree Trimmer Electrocuted in Indiana

FACE 87-65

## Introduction:

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Division of Safety Research (DSR) is currently conducting the Fatal Accident Circumstances and Epidemiology (FACE) Project, which is focusing primarily upon selected electrical-related and confined space-related fatalities. The purpose of the FACE program is to identify and rank factors that influence the risk of fatal injuries for selected employees.

On August 6, 1987, a tree trimmer performing contract work for a utility company was electrocuted while trimming a tree when he contacted a 7200 volt power line.

## Contacts/Activities:

Officials of the Occupational Safety and Health Program for the State of Indiana notified DSR concerning this fatality and requested technical assistance. This case has been included in the FACE Project. During the week of September 21, 1987, a DSR research team visited and photographed the accident site, discussed the case with Indiana OSHA personnel, and interviewed co-workers, company representatives, and a surrogate for the victim.

## Overview of Employer's Safety Program:

The victim was employed by a large, multi-state tree trimming company which employs 750 people. The company has been in operation since 1945 under the same management. The company has no formal safety program and training consists of "on-the-job" instruction by the crew foreman. The victim had been employed by the company for the past 18 months in the position he held at the time of his death. Awareness of the hazards posed by overhead lines was apparent by the presence of warning signs on company equipment.

## Synopsis of Events:

On the day of the incident the employee was working as a part of a crew consisting of four trimmers and one foreman. They were trimming trees along a power line right-of-way in a residential area. The crew had been on the job for three hours at the time the incident occurred. Numerous lines, including both high and low voltage electric, telephone, and cable TV ran through the trees at various heights in this area. Two trimmers were working in the trees cutting away brush while two others were working on the ground.

The victim was working in one tree and his fellow trimmer was in an adjacent tree. The victim was tied-off in the tree and had completed trimming on two major branches. He then began work on a third limb and leaned back to prune some small branches above his head. At this time the back of his neck came in contact with a 7200 volt line and the victim was electrocuted. Co-workers attempted to remove the victim from the tree by the use of his lifeline; however, this line was woven through the various branches of the tree and they were unable to extricate the victim. Employees from the local electric utility were called to the scene and managed to de-energize the line and remove the victim approximately 25 minutes after the incident. The victim suffered extensive burns on his neck and the lower portions of both legs. The victim was pronounced dead on the scene by the county coroner.

## Cause of Death:

The coroner's office listed electrocution as the cause of death.

## Recommendations/Discussion

**Recommendation #1: Formal training regarding the hazards posed by overhead power lines should be given to all employees who work near these lines. In addition, periodic refresher courses should be given to remind employees of the hazards.**

**Discussion:** No formal training had been given to the employee. The company relied on "on-the-job" training by the foreman and co-workers to assure hazard awareness and worker safety. A lack of basic electrical safety knowledge was apparent in a comment made to the DSR research team, that one of the lines in the tree was "only a 110 volt line which might shock him a little, but wouldn't really hurt him."

**Recommendation #2: A job site survey should be conducted prior to the start of any work involving overhead power lines. Supervisory personnel should point out potential problem areas to workers prior to the start of work.**

**Discussion:** Although the victim was doubtless aware of the power lines in the area, and had been working close to them all day, he still made a very serious mistake in that he positioned himself between the power line and the tree and worked with his back toward the power line. A discussion by the foreman prior to the start of work which pointed out the hazards and outlined a plan to complete the work safely might have prevented the fatality.

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