

Spotlight on Les Richings



Introduction by Richard Steele, ICHCA's CEO:

The wealth of knowledge and experience of our ICHCA community on safety matters concerning the whole breadth of international trade is truly remarkable. This valuable resource is available for all members, and increasingly we are making various aspects of it accessible to the wider cargo handling industry through ICHCA's regular Webinars and White Papers.

Through this newly introduced Spotlight feature we want to give more visibility to some of the professionals that make-up our membership giving more detail of their expertise, a flavour of their passion for safety and a little insight into their personalities, which portray their enthusiasm for our unique association.

Spotlight's first interviewee is Les Richings, Chair of the Dangerous Goods (DG) Working Group. For those of you that don't know Les, I hope you learn a lot from this introduction, and for those that know him already perhaps you'll see another side to a great advocate of the ICHCA cause.

Please look out for the regular Spotlight feature in the future which will continue conversations with others from our international community.

Spotlight: You obviously have a strong affinity with ICHCA and its aims. Why such passion?

Les: As international trade grows ever-more complex, so do the challenges of congestion, political and social upheaval and the demands of environmental sustainability – not to mention the continual quest for reduced cost. Inevitably safety issues surrounding the movement and storage of a vast array of goods become more varied, they evolve, develop and often become more dangerous when handling is not done properly. Sadly, this can result in lives lost and the destruction of property and cargo. What better motivation is there to try and improve the situation.

Spotlight: Of course, but why focus your energies through ICHCA?

Les: ICHCA is all about improving safety. But importantly its members understand that in an international environment that is cross-border, cross-cultural, multi-lingual and variable in the regulations that govern it, communication between practitioners is key. ICHCA provides the necessary forum for information sharing, discussion on best safety practices and a voice to advise regulators such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the UK's Department of Transport and other regulators around the world.

Spotlight: So, your role as Chair of the DG Working Group is fulfilling?

Les: I'm very proud of the work of the DG Group. We meet in person, well through the magic of the internet four times a year and maintain healthy debate year-round. By the way, due not just to the restraints of the pandemic but also because of obvious geographical restrictions, video conferencing has been and will remain a great boon to communicating regularly and effectively with Group members.

We bring together truly international and wide-ranging operational experience Anyone in ICHCA who has a DG role can volunteer to join the Group. We've been originators of several important safety advances bringing the IMO's attention to specific cargoes of concern in the container trades and more recently, preparing an advisory paper on the safe shipping of Ammonium Nitrate for discussion at the next CCC meeting (Carriage of Cargoes and Containers sub-committee) in September. ICHCA and the DG Group allows us ordinary operational folk access to the regulators.

Spotlight: How did you develop your DG skill-set and your aptitude for communication?

Les: I've been in the DG business for over thirty years now. Starting in the military, training cross-service personnel – there was a challenge, the services are so competitive. Then through a professional training organisation and a parcel delivery company to my current independent consultancy – all the time keeping abreast of DG regulations and passing on my knowledge. I guess it's in my blood.

Spotlight: And away from the challenges of teaching those that move potentially dangerous goods can you share with us your other passions?

Les: Well, my partner and I have two small dogs, which keep me fit. As spirited little dogs go our bichon frises have lively temperaments. I cycle too but have sadly now retired from both football refereeing and being a basketball umpire.

Spotlight: Ok, those pursuits seem to need a certain amount of control and people (perhaps also dog) management.

Les: Thinking about it, communication is the common link. Training disciplined processes like handling dangerous goods and keeping the peace on a football field have certain similarities. But now keeping our two bundles of trouble out of mischief is a bigger challenge by far.

Spotlight: How would you encapsulate the advantages of being part of ICHCA, whether in the DG Group, the Technical Panel or other committees.

Les: ICHCA is an active community of like-minded professionals. We are all in the business of safety, for sure, but being in the international cargo sector we are based in all four “corners” of the world. Discussing our concerns, our operational problems and ideas on innovative solutions with our peers on a day-to-day basis is not easy. Like any community we thrive on interaction, in this case through the written word, by phone, on Zoom and hopefully soon in person again. It’s both comforting and massively motivating to know that your safety issues are not unique and that there is someone out there who can help you solve them. In ICHCA, you are not alone.

Spotlight: Finally Les, looking to the future. What are your main areas of concern for safe cargo transport?

Les: Storage of many types of chemical products is going to remain an issue. As I said earlier congestion at ports and other facilities is a problem we will need to consider for some time to come, and where cargoes lay at rest for long periods of time the chances of accidents increase.

The rapid increase in the use of lithium batteries and the exponential demand to move them around, either within products such as phones and cars or independently, is bringing safety issues to the fore. We must increase our research into safe packaging and introduce safer procedures across the supply chain. Transport of used, damaged and end-of-life batteries is a particular concern.

And with environmental constraints rightly becoming more and more stringent the use of alternative fuels, such as ammonia and hydrogen - will increase the volumes of these commodities that are being transported and stored. Much will therefore need to be done to properly manage these processes.

Spotlight: Many thanks for your time, Les and we hope your contribution to this inaugural Spotlight feature will pave the way for many more insightful conversations with other ICHCA members in the future.