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## EXPERT OPINION:

Application of occupational standards



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# A Quick Switch back to semi-automatic hitches

The voluntary ban on new semi-automatic hitches that came into being last October seems to have created confusion and uncertainty within the construction industry. In the drive to tackle the problems with hitches the industry has been pushed towards adoption of fully automatic or manual type hitches.

Many remain sceptical about claims that the automatic systems offer greater safety to the tried and tested semi-automatics. Some have reported problems with jamming when debris gets into the locking mechanism. More alarmingly, many have pointed out that operators cannot have full confidence that the hitch is safely engaged – the very problem that the HSE-led ban sought to resolve.

With a number of deaths in recent years on sites, it may only be a matter of time before a serious accident involving a fully automatic system will show that the cure has failed and the patient is still sick. Then the whole issue of quick hitch systems will need to be addressed once again.

Now, though, one company appears to have come up with a fool-proof and inexpensive fix that won't force you to throw the baby out with the bathwater – a welcome message for hard-pressed company accountants and plant managers and, crucially, for safety professionals.

Hertfordshire-based Quick Switch UK has patented a revolutionary system using cutting-edge technology that should make your existing semi-automatic 100 per cent safe. Semis are still wholly legal

to use as the ban only prevents the manufacture and supply of new semis in the UK market. Quick Switch focused their product development on the fact that in almost all instances of accidents or fatalities the problem was not with the semi-automatic quick hitch but was instead down to operator misuse. They decided that in addition to training something more was needed to ensure operators used the equipment correctly.

The main product, which has been trialled on several sites (including the Olympic site in East London), is a warning system that will trigger an alarm in the cab as soon as the safety pin is removed. Simultaneously a beacon on the cab roof will start flashing, warning anyone working nearby that the machine is not in safe mode. Other configurations are available as required by the customer.

Tony Bianchi, managing director of Quick Switch, said: "It seems absurd to change perfectly good semi-automatic hitches that with our product are as safe, if not safer, than the fully automatic. There is no safer hitch than a semi-automatic with the safety pin in and our product ensures just that. We like to think of it as the operator's conscience in the cab."

The company is participating in a BSI panel set up to contribute to the development of standards on quick couplers and Bianchi said, "I hope that our contribution to this panel will strengthen the case for the continuing use of the semi-automatic system. It is after all universally accepted that the operator is the weak link rather than the hitch itself. That is why we developed our system to challenge bad working practices and remind the operator of his responsibilities."

For further information contact:  
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## Quick-hitch warning systems, Tony Bianchi, Quickswitch (UK) Ltd

Keeping alive the debate on quick-hitch safety, Mr Tony Bianchi from Quickswitch announced the development and now sale of a revolutionary new audio safety system that alerts an operator if the pin has not been inserted correctly into a semi automatic hitch. A series of film footage was played to demonstrate the system and show how it performs under a number of scenarios.

Some equipment operators present were concerned about the recent

attempt to ban semi automatic hitches but it was explained that the ban was only voluntary at this juncture and supported by some manufacturers, not all. There was also some debate about what to do with existing machines and the general consensus was to ensure that the operator is trained and that any safety device is operated correctly. Semi automatic hitches will be used within industry for some time to come, so this device could make a contribution to workplace safety.

*For more information, visit:*  
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