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Book review

Flash points of organic and organometallic compounds, by R.M. Stephenson, Elsevier, 1987, viii + 295 pages, £50, ISBN 0-444-01239-7

When I began my doctoral research, almost 15 years ago, the rules of academic (and I suspect industrial) laboratories regarding safety were much less stringent than they are today. We wore safety glasses for experiments, but rarely when sitting at our lab desks, and we often worked alone, even though forbidden to do so. Automatic water cut-out devices and automatic temperature control were beginning to become commonplace by the end of my Ph.D. I doubt that I had more than an extremely hazy idea of what was meant by a flash point. Times have changed, and not before time. Safety glasses are now *de rigeur* at all times in laboratories, even for social visitors, and here in Sussex, offenders risk a period of suspension from the department. Risk assessment, monitoring of safety and toxicity data, and awareness of first aid practices have become a part of daily life for all practical chemists. We can no more prevent all accidents in chemical laboratories than we can in our homes, or on our roads, but we should hope that the days in which every chemical faculty of any size had at least one member with missing or irreversibly damaged digits are gone.

These changes, both in laboratory practice and in legislation covering academic and industrial laboratories, have led to a burgeoning of literature in the area of safety. This present volume represents a compilation of data from a range of sources, mostly chemical manufacturers. The data from the Aldrich catalogue are among the most prominent and are probably among the more reliable, since they have in general been determined “in house” by the company. Compounds are listed by molecular formula, and although the book has been produced from a camera-ready manuscript, it is clear and legible, and entries are easy to find.

This could not be called a highly interesting book, but then it is not intended for bedtime reading. We all need to become more aware of the need to look up the data it contains. My reservations about it are twofold. This is an expensive work, if one considers that at least 70% of it is derived from, and thus accessible from, the Aldrich catalogue or free Aldrich hazard sheets. Secondly, the safety-conscious chemist must consider not only the flash point, but also toxicity and other biological hazard data for the compounds he uses. With this in mind, he may find one of the more comprehensive compilations of hazard data more generally useful.

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