

SUB-STANDARD COLLISIONS REPAIRS: IMPLICATIONS FOR FLEET OPERATORS; OSH & WOF CHECKS

TWO ISSUES OF concern to fleet operators that are closely linked, but rarely considered in tandem, are company vehicle OSH obligations and vehicle repairs, particularly collision repairs.

Generations of fleet operators have been implicitly aware of the value of good quality repairs but until recently, those considerations have related primarily to protecting the integrity - and therefore the resale value - of the vehicle itself.

Recently though, the much more significant human safety factor has been highlighted by OSH obligations, and at a time when collision technology is progressing at the same break-neck speed as the more glamorous high-tech industries.

New Zealand Warrant of Fitness standards were historically some of the most stringent in the world, and served as a valuable safety mechanism, albeit at an arbitrary six-month interval regardless of circumstances.

Unfortunately though, the scope of these checks has not kept pace with the phenomenal complexity in vehicle technology and construction now common-place in modern vehicles.

This is a critical problem and, when combined with the high variability within the unregulated collision repair sector in NZ, exposes a serious safety concern for all drivers.

The WoF inspection requirements are well intentioned and guidelines for rejection include Vehicle Structure 3.1 as follows:

1. 1.g) poor repairs that have not returned the structure to within a safe tolerance of when it was manufactured, such as:
2. filler has been used in an attempt to conceal corrosion damage or deformation of a component.
3. A high-strength steel component has been heated.
4. A component has been strengthened.

This is an admirable attempt to identify substandard and/or dangerous repairs, BUT WoF inspectors are mechanics - NOT collision repair experts.

Additionally, componentry compliance and functionality receive the bulk of the inspectors attention, with less focus on under-body, very little on engine bay and panel-work, and (logically enough) none whatsoever on unseen reinforcement and structural body construction.

In any event, most of the above can easily be disguised with paintwork and/or under-body sealers, making it difficult to detect except in a very concentrated inspection by an experienced collision repair expert.

Why is this a problem?

Because there are significant numbers of 'panelbeating shops' operating in NZ that have not and will not invest in the required technical training, plant and equipment, quality standards and

processes, or possess a standard of management that is capable and/or interested in complying with manufacturers strict repair guidelines. The not surprising result of course, is that their repair rates are very competitive and a temptation to all comers, including some insurers.

Why is any of this important?

It is critically important and increasingly so, due to the complexity of modern vehicle construction including multiple computers, air-bags, hybrid power-trains (combined fuel, electric motor, nickel-metal hydride batteries), after-market copy-cat panels, a staggering array of model-specific repair techniques and a wide range of steel alloys with limited repair-ability, including boron steel, high-strength-low-alloy (HSLA) and magnesium/copper aluminium alloys.

The first two materials are used to increase strength and reduce weight in structural areas like dash-panels, bumper re-enforcements, B-pillars and door guard beams - all designed to keep us safe.

Unfortunately the majority are not designed to be straightened, heated or repaired as this destroys the strength and safety features of the material.

Regrettably, there are less scrupulous panel-shops that are ignorant of these quality/safety requirements, not equipped or simply not inclined to comply.

Fortunately, there are also some very high quality collision repair facilities throughout NZ that have invested significantly in management, technical training, P and E and facilities.

Often there is little to differentiate the five-star from the no-star in the collision repair sector and identifying a quality facility can be a minefield, particularly for smaller fleet operators that do not necessarily have the in-house expertise or the dedicated resources to manage the accident repair process.

In response, a number of fleet management firms have evolved in recent years and have developed some level of accident management service, usually charging a flat monthly fee regardless of activity or requirement.

As with any high-tech machinery R&M, accident management is specialised and relies on extensive technical knowledge and alliances with selected service providers capable of achieving consistent high quality.

Ideally then, accident management firms should be run by those with a background in the collision repair industry, not by accountants.

One such company is Crash Brokers Ltd.

Crash Brokers launched in 2004, currently serves all of the greater Auckland area and provides a one-call solution via an 0800 call-centre with 24/7 coverage including road-side assistance.

Priority response is guaranteed - late model courtesy cars are delivered to the customer's door, instructions are issued to the selected service provider, the repair process and all communications are managed to minimise inconvenience and maximise performance.

The whole experience is designed to be as painless as possible - including the cost - Crash Brokers service is provided free to the customer.

The director, Karen Knight, is a veteran of the collision repair industry and ensures the highest technical and customer service standards are achieved.

No more concerns then about whether your boron steel intrusion bars have been cut with an oxyacetylene torch, the HSLA B-pillars repaired with high heat, or even that the paint-work is accurately colour matched and finished to the right level of gloss. Certainly no more concerns regarding unidentified substandard repairs slipping through the next WoF check and the unwelcome implications for company vehicle OSH obligations. For more information see the www.crashbrokers.co.nz.website.

