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First published on Tuesday 22 July 2003:

School fined over pupils' science class injuries

TWO pupils at a North-East school needed hospital treatment after they were sprayed in the eyes with a chemical when an A-level experiment went wrong, a court heard.

The governing body of St Cuthbert's High School in Newcastle was fined £2,000 and ordered to pay £3,638 costs after it admitted responsibility for the explosion in the school's science laboratory.

It admitted failing in its duty to protect pupils under the Health and Safety Act, at Gosforth Magistrates' Court.

Health and Safety Inspector Chris Lucas said pupils were using Tollen's reagent, made up of ammonia, silver nitrate and caustic soda, to see if a compound was an aldehyde.

But the reagent was made up too far in advance, in too large a quantity and it exploded as one pupil put a pipette into the storage bottle, the court was told.

The student worst affected, who was 17 at the time of the accident, needed a biological dressing to repair the damage to his eye and suffered post traumatic stress.

Mr Lucas said the school should have realised the dangers of preparing the reagent too early as it was widely known it could become unstable within 30 minutes.

He said pupils were not wearing safety glasses.

David Athey, defending, said St Cuthbert's had tightened up its health and safety procedures since the "alarming, nasty incident".

A Newcastle City Council spokeswoman said: "This was an isolated incident and the local education authority has full confidence in the headteacher and staff at St Cuthbert's High School."

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