

ELECTRICAL RENOVATIONS

Handyman wiring can have deadly results



ELIZABETH RAND-WATKINSON
erand-watkinson@globalandmail.com

A few years ago, an Ontario family hired a handyman to install landscape lighting. Not knowing the difference between interior and exterior cable — he had no training in electrical work and wasn't actually a bona fide contractor — the handyman used interior-grade cable for the job.

In order to get around the driveway, he scraped out a trench a few inches deep along its edge to lay the cable. We can only assume that the risk of someone shovelling snow and accidentally cutting through the cable, with potentially fatal results, didn't occur to him. And we'll never know because he electrocuted himself while installing the cable.

Investigators later discovered between 20 and 30 defects in the 60 feet of cable the handyman had installed before he died. If the poor man hadn't paid with his own life, investigators say the lives of children playing in the yard would have been endangered.

In 2006, an electrician was installing ductwork for a bathroom ventilation fan through the attic and roof of his Ontario home. A previous owner



An investigator's photo shows the dangerous landscape lighting installation that led to one man's death.

had done some wiring, incorrectly, with the result that every time the bathroom light was turned on, a metal electrical box in the attic became energized. While installing the ductwork, the electrician/homeowner accidentally bumped into the now live electrical box with his head and was electrocuted.

The Ontario government passed a law earlier this year that is designed to save people from these types of disasters. It requires all electrical contractors to be licensed by the Electrical Contractor Registra-

tion Agency of the Electrical Safety Authority. Since the beginning of the year, about 12,000 electrical contractors and master electricians have been licensed.

The law also requires consumers to hire only licensed electrical contractors. This applies to all residential renovations requiring electrical work, no matter how minor a job may seem to a layperson.

Peter Marucci, regulatory affairs vice-president of the Electrical Safety Authority says, "This new law ensures consumers are protected against

individuals who are not qualified and may perform electrical services that do not meet Ontario's safety standards. Ontarians can now feel confident that when they hire a licensed electrical contractor, they are hiring someone who is qualified, competent and insured in accordance with the law."

"We've all either seen first hand or heard about shoddy electrical work. I've written about it in this column more than once, most memorably (for me, at least) when I was covering the renovation of our century home in Mississauga.

The number of wiring-related fire hazards my contractor uncovered was hair-raising.

After 60 years of patchwork municipal licensing requirements, Ontarians finally have a single provincewide standard for all electrical contracting businesses.

I know there will still be the odd homeowner who thinks he or she can cut costs and corners by hiring the cousin who dabbled in electricity. Despite the 100 Ontario workers and homeowners who have been electrocuted and the 2,974 electrical fires that have been reported since 1998, you can't save everyone from himself.

Nevertheless, besides protecting the public from the unqualified, this legal requirement will make consumers accountable. Put bluntly, if you hire someone who isn't licensed to do electrical work in your home, you're breaking the law.

If you're in doubt about your electrical contractor's standing, ask for a license number. If you're looking for a licensed electrical contractor, call 1-877-372-7233 or visit the Electrical Safety Authority website at www.plugsafely.ca. The website is continually being improved and already contains a treasure trove of useful information covering the gamut — from how to hire a contractor and fees for inspection services to things you need to know to be safe in your home. This is one site worth adding to your Internet "favourites" list.



A poster by the Electrical Safety Authority points out electrical dangers lurking at home.

Safety tips

These five steps to protect your family and home are excerpted from the Electrical Safety Authority website:

- Consult a licensed electrical contractor about your home's electrical requirements;
- Ask about the Ontario Electrical Safety Code rules for electrical wiring and installations;
- Always turn the power off from the panel box and use an approved tester to ensure it's off;
- Have your electrical work inspected as required by the code;
- Use only electrical products that have the mark of a recognized certification agency.