



The Law even politicians don't know

Deputy Labour leader Jacinda Ardern has been an unwitting - but effective - publicist in the dangers of do-it-yourself renovations to homes.

But the danger remains for many unknowing DIYers who may out themselves at risk financially or in a health and safety way.

In February, Ardern was featured in a newspaper article where she volunteered she and her partner had successfully installed a new toilet in their Auckland home "without flooding the place". Only problem was, such work must, by law, be carried out by a registered plumber.

Ardern clearly had no knowledge the task had to be undertaken by a professional; a complaint was made, she apologised and the regulatory body, the Plumbers, Gasfitters and Drainlayers Board (PGDB), issued a warning and called the matter closed.

However, PDGB chief executive Martin Sawyers says Ardern's accidental foray into an unlawful toilet installation was highly useful as an unintended publicity device.

"It showed a lot of people that a lot of people don't know that such work is illegal - and that it is illegal for very good reasons. Unlicensed operators can cause a lot of damage and threaten people's health and safety.

'Our message is simply that DIY is fine; it's a part of our DNA in New Zealand, after all. But you have to be aware that many plumbing, gasfitting and drainlaying tasks have to be undertaken by a registered professional because of the complexity of the tasks.'

The PDGB is cracking down on "cowboy" contractors and unauthorised tradesmen doing work for homeowners. Its Report-A-Cowboy app has been downloaded more than 10,000 times so far and 126 complaints laid against suspected "cowboys".

But DIYers are also at risk. The maximum penalty for undertaking restricted plumbing and drainlaying work is \$10,000 and \$50,000 for restricted gasfitting projects.

"Some of the worst culprits are renovators who have launched into additions without regard for restricted work, passing on costly problems to the next buyer," says Sawyers.

One example was a builder who installed a gas hob/cooker as part of getting a house ready for sale. It sounds simple enough but restricted plumbing, gasfitting and drainlaying work by anyone who is not licensed by the PGDB is unlawful. The builder was not qualified to do the gasfitting.

"What happened after that is a good example of the dangers people face if a registered professional is not used," says Sawyers.

"In the month following the sale and the new owners' move into the house, they noticed an unexplained smell of gas. They contacted a local plumbing and gasfitting company who found defective work - there was a significant leak from a gas pipe in an upstairs wall cavity leading to the upstairs cooker.

"Gas pipes leaking into a wall cavity are particularly dangerous. The cavity can fill up with gas which can then be ignited by a spark given off by the working of a light switch or other electrical fittings."

If blowing up the house at the time of installation doesn't occur, there can be other, smaller forms of "explosion" later on - but still damaging.

"Our advice to buyers is to check renovated homes carefully," says Sawyers. "If they don't, they could face problems insuring or selling properties if restricted work has not been carried out by a licensed tradesman.

"There can be, in those situations, the risk of legal action - an expensive option for those taking the action and those defending it. Better by far to get it done by a registered professional in the first place."

Sawyers says the PDGB are seeing increased numbers of "cowboys" going to court "because we are getting better at detecting them."

The Report A Cowboy (RAC) app launched last year, downloadable from the PGDB website, had attracted more than 10,000 downloads - with 126 complaints laid over the app last year with 15 so far this year. Just under half the complaints involved allegedly unauthorised plumbers.

The PGDB's awareness programme, "Sort the pros from the cons", had also helped make homeowners and landlords realise they had only to ask for a registered tradesman to produce a licence card issued by the PDGB to be sure they were dealing with a bona fide professional.

"Keep safe and avoid dealing with any service providers who cannot produce a licence card issued by the PGDB," he says, "and if you have any suspicions or want to report some alleged wrongdoing, use the RAC.