

Does Your Tenant Know How to Isolate Gas, Water and Electricity in Case of an Emergency?

Shôn Ellerton, June 3, 2018

You may know what to do if your home has a water or gas leak or if you need cut off the power in an emergency, but does your tenant know what to do?



Whilst having a family walk high up in the Adelaide Hills on a fine sunny Sunday, I received an urgent phone call from my letting agent informing me that one of my tenants discovered a water leak coming out of the kitchen. Not just a small drip but enough to start doing some real damage to the surrounding wooden laminate floors. Let me just backtrack a little. The agent tried to call some moments ago but I was unable to answer so she ended up leaving a voice message which I did not attend to as she got me the second time around. My initial thought when I answered the phone is that this was clearly going to be bad news considering it was a weekend. She then asked if it was okay to call up an emergency plumber to fix the situation. Naturally I said yes.

Later I had thoughts about what the extent of the damage could be. I once had a burst water pipe in my home and remember the experience of the severe damage it inflicted on the wooden laminate flooring requiring extensive repairs followed up by an insurance claim. Other thoughts sprung to mind (no pun intended). If the leak was significant, why would the agent not act immediately if I was not contactable the first time? But the main thought I had much later in the day was

far more serious. Would the agent have informed the tenant to switch off the main water supply to the property at the meter and stopcock located out in front of the house? Would the agent even know where to find it? I'm worryingly certain that my tenant, a single mother and her three young kids who just moved in to the property, wouldn't have a clue where it is unless she was told so. I'm also ninety-nine percent certain that the agent would not have instructed the tenant what to do in an emergency as part of the induction prior to taking up residence. Having rented in an earlier life both in Australia and the UK, I have never been instructed by the agent where and how to isolate gas, water and electricity in case of an emergency. I suppose I never really needed to ask because one of the first things I do before taking up any residence is to know how to isolate the gas, electricity, water or oil in case of an emergency; a habit I probably formed during my childhood years spending many months at sea on my father's boat knowing how to use the bilge pump!

For those of us in Australia who have tenants in rented properties, you will know full well many of the stringent rules and regulations which, if broken, could lead to a possible breach of contract or worse, a tribunal court case. For example, I was told off by the agent for leaving a package at the front door of the tenant's house containing a flatpack cupboard to be installed during the following week by a tradesman arranged by the agent. In Australia, landlords are responsible for changing the lightglobes (or lightbulbs) when they fizzle out. Seriously. When I used to rent, I think I would have preferred to accidentally lock myself out of the house with no clothes on rather than going through the embarrassment of calling up the rental agent to change a poxy lightbulb! Yet, when it comes to inducting new tenants into rental properties, there are no comprehensive guidelines for the agent to follow. If there are, they are clearly not being enforced properly due to my past experiences as a renter.

On a side note, building practices are generally improving in Australia. For example, when new plumbing fixtures are installed or existing ones revamped, isolation taps are included as part of the installation. This is just plain common sense. I was completely dumbfounded when I found out that many older apartment complexes were built with no mains water isolation taps for each apartment!

I would like to see formal guidelines and regulations in the Australian rentals market on this subject; however, this is what I am going to do in future for now on with new and existing tenants. Write down methodically instructions to your agent or tenant (if you're dealing directly) how to isolate the gas, water and

electricity for the property. Get your agent to pass it on to the tenant and have the tenant and agent sign it and return.

Now dare I say if *you* know what to do in your own home in such an emergency!