Healthcare: Fire risk and future fire strategies

The NHS has one of the largest and most varied estates in the world containing many of the most dependent people in society.

With around 6000 fires occurring in NHS premises each year, its duty of care – and that of other healthcare providers – demands very close attention to fire safety.

In the current financial climate, it is essential the NHS can ensure continued fire safety. This can be best achieved through consideration of fire risk assessment and future fire strategies. These considerations are of crucial importance, not only in preventing injury and death to patients, visitors and staff, but also to ensuring the continuity of care provision.

All healthcare premises have legal duties to properly consider fire safety under the Fire Safety Order 2005. Although the Fire Safety Order is intended to protect life, in doing so it also brings significant benefits to business continuity and the continued provision of care (although this is no substitute for formal risk management of the provision of care).

The Rosepark care home fire in 2004 in which 14 people died, was one of the worst fires in a care home in the UK and serves as a tragic example of the dangers of fire in healthcare premises. A Fatal Accident Inquiry was started on the case in November 2009 and concluded in August 2010. After 141 days of evidence, it is considered to be the longest Fatal Accident Inquiry in Scottish history. There was much speculation about fire precautions and risk management in the care home before the investigation, research, findings and lessons to be learned from the tragedy were recently presented at a special BRE conference.

The safety of patients and the continuity of their care, along with rigorously enforced legal requirements, mean that all healthcare premises must undertake fire risk assessments. Good relationships and effective systems of sharing information between Healthcare Fire Advisors and Fire and Rescue Service Auditors mean the necessary fire safety audits
carried out by the Fire and Rescue Service can be made far less onerous and more beneficial.

Fire risk assessments can be complex tasks but guidance and expert help is available.

**Fire risk assessments**

The fire risk assessment is the foundation for fire safety measures. It is used as a tool to help identify issues that require attention, and help plan ahead to protect staff and business. The Inquiry into the Rosepark tragedy identified that one of the main failures was the lack of a suitable and sufficient fire risk assessment for the home and an appropriate action plan to ensure effective precautions, as required by law. This would have identified more of the shortcomings that contributed to the severity of the incident.

After Rosepark, the Scottish Government conducted over 1800 urgent visits to care homes to emphasise the need for suitable fire risk assessments to be carried out.

**Pitfalls of fire risk assessment**

Common problems with fire risk assessment have been identified in an HSE study\(^1\) that examined the experiences of organisations responsible for reviewing risk assessments. It found that many assessments were carried out using inappropriate practices.

There was often, for example, a lack of involvement of those employees with practical knowledge of the issue being assessed. There were also failures to identify all of the hazards associated with particular activities, to link hazards with risk controls, to fully consider all possible outcomes, and to make full use of the findings of the assessment. The ineffective use of consultants was also identified as a common pitfall. Although not specifically considering fire risk assessment of healthcare premises, it may well be worth bearing these pitfalls in mind.

**Choosing a fire risk assessor**

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has produced a series of guides on fire risk, one of which applies specifically to healthcare premises. This guide was written to allow managers of small healthcare premises, with no patients dependent on staff for evacuation, to undertake the risk assessment.
Many large NHS Trusts have Healthcare Fire Advisors who have an excellent knowledge of healthcare fire safety and many of whom have been trained in fire risk assessment. However, the resources needed to fully risk assess the extensive estates of large healthcare providers means that consultants such as BRE Fire and Security are often appointed to carry out them out.

It is very important that healthcare providers make proper and well-informed choices when appointing fire risk assessors. DCLG guidance notes that: ‘More complex facilities may need to be assessed by a person who has comprehensive training or experience in fire risk assessment with input from a number of sources, including local staff or their safety representatives’. This is also why the Department of Health published FIRECODE Part K ‘Fire risk assessment in complex healthcare premises.’

The recently published ‘Competency Criteria for Fire Risk Assessors’ sets out criteria that can be used by professional and third-party certification bodies to register or certificate fire risk assessors, and by organisations that provide fire risk assessment services. It has been developed due to persistent concerns over the competency of fire risk assessors leading to fire risk assessments that were neither suitable nor sufficient.

While it is very unlikely that third party certification of this nature will become mandatory under legislation, Government acknowledges the benefits to duty holders of third party certification of fire protection products and services as a means of assisting in compliance with legislation. This includes fire risk assessment services.

**Questions when considering appointing a fire risk assessor**

- Are the assessors appropriately qualified and experienced in:
  - fire safety?
  - complex healthcare premises?
  - risk assessment?
- Is the most senior risk assessor appropriately qualified or registered, eg CEng MIFireE or IFE risk assessors register or a member of an accredited certification scheme?
- Is a template being proposed and if so, is it appropriate?
- Are junior members of the team supervised by a higher level of qualified staff?
Will the fire risk assessments be checked and approved? If so, are the approver and checker appropriately qualified and experienced?

Does the fire risk assessor/team have a track record of fire risk assessment in complex healthcare premises?

There are a number of agencies, professional bodies and trade associations that provide registers of fire risk assessors. The PASA² website also contains details of companies who can provide services such as fire risk assessment.

**Future fire strategies**

The enforcement of the Fire Safety Order by Fire and Rescue Services and severe budgetary reductions in real terms are challenging the continued provision of fire safety in healthcare premises. How can we ensure continued fire safety against a background of cut backs in staffing levels and pressure on ongoing maintenance of services and infrastructure?

BRE Global (part of the BRE Trust) considers that there is a need to establish a new knowledge base and risk methodology to underpin the development of new fire strategies for the NHS in order to optimise their spending on fire safety provisions. It is piloting its own fire risk assessment training and certification schemes to ensure research and good industry practice are properly understood throughout the industry.

BRE Global is currently undertaking a project to identify which fire precautions and combinations of fire precautions are most cost-risk effective for life safety, continuity of care, financial risk management and sustainability.

The project will analyse the healthcare fire statistics to assess the reliability and effectiveness of a range of fire precautions in healthcare premises. The risk model developed in this work will be used to assess a range of alternative healthcare fire strategies.

The project will provide new knowledge and findings on the most cost-effective fire strategies for healthcare premises. The project will also identify innovative fire strategies for healthcare premises. BRE Trust funding will enable the analysis of NHS Fire Statistics to identify which fire precautions and combinations of fire precautions are most cost-risk effective. This should result in safer and more cost effective healthcare premises, improved financial risk
management and mission continuity and improved sustainability.

For more information contact David Charters, Director of Fire Engineering:
Email chartersd@bre.co.uk or visit www.redbooklive.com.

2. PASA: www.pasa.nhs.uk/pasaweb/productsandservices/consultancy/suppliersprofiles.htm

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