

Preventing Hospital Fires in India

Posted at: 07/12/2024

Preventing Hospital Fires in India: A Call for Systemic Reform

Context:

The alarming frequency of hospital fires in India underscores the urgent need for **accountability** and **systemic reforms**. Despite comprehensive fire safety guidelines from the **National Building Code** and **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)**, lapses in compliance persist. These incidents reveal a disregard for safety protocols, poorly designed infrastructure, and governance failures.

Why Are Hospital Fires in India a Recurring Issue?

- **Poor Fire Safety Measures:**
Despite extensive guidelines, many hospitals fail to comply with basic fire safety norms.
 - **Key Contributing Factors:**
 - **Poorly designed safety exits** impede evacuation.
 - **Electricity load mismanagement** increases fire risks.
 - **Improper storage of combustible materials** exacerbates hazards.
 - **Neglect of fire safety protocols**, such as maintenance of fire alarms and sprinklers.
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What Role Does Electrical Load Mismanagement Play in Hospital Fires?

- **Short Circuits:**
Short circuits are the leading cause of hospital fires. Healthcare facilities often experience a **25% annual increase in electricity load** after commissioning.
 - **Preventive Measures Needed:**
 - **Budgeting for buffer loads** during facility planning.
 - **Periodic recalibration of electrical systems**, as recommended by the NDMA.
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Are Hospitals Adhering to NDMA's Fire Safety Guidelines?

- Many hospitals neglect critical safety requirements, including:
 - Installation of **fire alarms and sprinkler systems**.
 - Conducting **mandatory periodic safety checks**.
- The prioritization of **cost-cutting over safety** exacerbates risks.

What Role Do Municipalities Play in Fire Safety?

- **Weakened Governance:**

Municipal bodies, responsible for fire safety inspections, often fail to enforce regulations.

- **Key Issues:**

- Inspections are **infrequent**, occurring once every few years.
 - Unauthorized structures are **regularized**, compromising safety standards.
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What Did the Justice D A Mehta Committee Reveal?

- **Investigation Findings:**

The committee probed fires in two Gujarat hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded that:

- **Fatalities were avoidable** if illegal structures had not been regularized.
 - Policies on **unauthorized construction** in healthcare facilities require a serious reevaluation.
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What Needs to Change to Prevent Hospital Fires?

1. **Strict Enforcement of NDMA Guidelines:**

- Regular **recalibration of electrical loads**.
- Mandatory installation and maintenance of **fire safety systems**.

2. **Strengthening Municipal Governance:**

- Conduct **frequent inspections** with accountability for lapses.
- Cease the **regularization of unauthorized structures** in healthcare facilities.

3. **Ensuring Accountability:**

- Stricter penalties for **hospital authorities and owners** found negligent.
 - Legal and financial consequences for failure to meet safety standards.
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Conclusion:

Preventing hospital fires requires a **multi-pronged approach** involving stricter enforcement of fire safety norms, enhanced municipal oversight, and accountability for negligence. By prioritizing safety over cost-cutting and unauthorized construction, India can safeguard lives and ensure its healthcare infrastructure is resilient and secure.