

Presentation on Safety at Home this Christmas

Simar Patel, Home Safety Unit, West Midlands Fire Service

Bob Cole thanked **Simar** for making this presentation at short notice, because the planned speaker was unable to be present. He went on to say that Simar had worked in the Home Safety Unit of West Midlands Fire Service for three years, as a non-uniformed officer.

Simar started her presentation by giving us the background to WMFS range of work in dealing with fires, Road Traffic Collisions (RTCs), burning Vehicles, Train Collisions, Disaster Rehearsals and Flood Rescue. Her photographs were graphic illustrations of the horrendous consequences of such accidents and this one serves to show how vulnerable car occupants can be when faced with only a small tree! She went on to say that the WMFS covered 2.6 million people, from 40 Fire Stations, staffed by 2,100 Firefighters. She and her colleagues in the Home Safety Unit focussed on fire safety in the home, because that is where the majority of deaths and injuries occur. Since 2004, she added, there has been a welcome reduction of 500 fires per annum in homes across the West Midlands area.

The high risk groups are: -

- Elderly
- Homes with young children
- Smoking households
- People with disabilities

Aggravating factors for these groups are: -

- Bedridden patients
- Alcohol
- Prescription and/or Recreational Drug use
- Pets.

The most common causes of fire are: -

- Smoking materials, where every three days, someone dies from a fire caused by a cigarette –
 - Frequently, smokers fall asleep in a chair with a lighted cigarette in their hand and this is aggravated after drinking alcohol. A wise precaution is to only buy furniture made with fire resistant materials. and NEVER smoke in bed!
 - Always keep matches and lighters away from children

Simar showed a video clip of a discarded cigarette on a carpet, where the subsequent fire spread with alarming speed.

- Cooking – 60% of all fires start in the kitchen, primarily from chip pans! Where this happens it is crucial to turn off the source of heat, as soon as possible. Do not, ever, attempt to extinguish fat fires by throwing water at them – the results are catastrophic and can cause horrific injuries as hot, burning fat is cascaded over the

kitchen. Even the use of fire blankets, once recommended, is now discouraged as it can sometimes cause forearm burns in particularly fierce fires. The current advice is ***Get Out, Stay Out and call 999!***

- Electrical faults – these can occur in 13 Amp adaptors that can drop down in use and cause local overheating. Sometimes people place a succession of adaptors in tandem to obtain extra outlets and this places even more mechanical stress on the contacts, with the result that they overheat very quickly. Simar also emphasised the need to be very cautious about the excessive use of extension leads as these often become damaged and even posed hazards on escape routes in the event of fires. The golden rule is to use one plug per socket!

It is essential always to check that appliances are safe to leave on standby when unattended for any length of time, particularly overnight. It is also important to operate appliances correctly as items like fridges can overheat dangerously if a door is left open so that the motor tries to compensate by working continuously!

- Candles – these come in many forms and are used more often at Christmas time and Diwali, causing as many as five fires a day! Placing next to flammable materials like curtains that move around is a frequent cause as is placing underneath items, which can cause overheating over an extended period. Some special effect candles are designed with a metal baseplate, but it is important to realise that these plates get very hot when the candles burn down and can ignite wooden furniture. A simple remedy is to place them in a shallow ceramic dish and make sure that it was large enough! The golden rule is never to leave burning candles unattended in a room!

Simar added that placing of candles in unusual places could catch people by surprise when carrying out routine tasks, such as reaching for household objects. It is easy for the flame to contact clothing, very often with disastrous results.

- Naked flames in fires should always be guarded to prevent accidental contact with discarded flammable materials that may not be present at other times in the year. Natural coal and log fires should also be guarded to prevent sparks from flying out onto furnishings and other flammable materials.

Moving on to the topic of fire precautions, Simar mentioned the important issue of smoke alarms and said that 40% of properties do not have a working smoke alarm! The questions to ask yourself are: -

- Do you have at least one smoke alarm per floor?
- Are they fitted in the right place? (On the ceiling)
- Do they work? They should be tested once per week, the battery, if fitted, needs to be checked every 12 months, accumulated dust should be cleared every 6 months and the units replaced every 10 years.

This photograph shows the recommended positions for smoke alarms and it should be noted that they are not placed in bathrooms or kitchens because of the risk of nuisance tripping.



Simar then reinforced these principles with a case study about a fire fatality in a residential property. The learning points focussed on the massive accumulation of spent cigarettes and packets, the overwhelming obstruction of escape routes with furniture and household appliances and the crucial presence of an electrical extension lead across the exit route. It was this extension lead that fatally tripped the aged female occupant and there was evidence of blood from a head injury on a telephone. Every thing in the house indicated a high fire risk and militated against a safe escape from the almost inevitable fire!

Simar went on to describe the WMFS recommended *“Night Time Routine”*, as follows: -

- Switch off electrical appliances
- Carefully stub out cigarettes and, ideally, put some water in the bottom of ashtrays.
- Place outdoor keys in a convenient place to locate in an emergency, but not where they are immediately obvious to intruders.
- Remove obstacles like toys and bicycles from final escape routes.
- Ensure that a mobile phone is readily available
- Ensure that exit doors can be opened easily

On the subject of fire doors, Simar showed photos of both sides of a door to contrast the burnt-out room on one side with the untouched office on the other. She added that even non-fire doors could delay the spread of fire by about 15 minutes, so it was essential to keep internal doors closed to avoid a rapid spread. She warned that it was important to always test the temperature of the door with the back of the hand, before opening, to see if its temperature indicated the

presence of fire on the other side. Pets, she added, were often able to detect a problem before humans, so it was important to observe their behaviour as well!

Simar concluded by saying that it was important to devise an **“Escape Plan”**, and to make sure that all the household were familiar with it, well in advance of being caught in a fire. These are two she outlined: -

| Plan A Not trapped by Fire | Plan B Trapped by Fire |
|---|---|
| Test the temperature of the door and, if cold, open it. | Test the temperature of the door and, if warm/hot, DO NOT open it. |
| If there is smoke present, crawl low to the floor | Block the gaps around the door |
| Get out of the house by the nearest downstairs door. When outside, telephone 999. | Shout “FIRE” until you get someone’s attention to phone 999 |
| Wait for the Fire Service. NEVER go back in | Stand by the open window |

Members' Questions

Mark Hoare of Birmingham University commented that the Mobile Support Demonstration Unit had been to talk to students in their halls of residence and was able to make use of realistic scenarios.

Bob Cole asked if the 10-year batteries were a standard fitting and Simar said that they were only in the units installed by WMFS.

Chris Peck of Birmingham City University asked what the life of the detectors were and Simar replied that they were about 8 years, with the Mains Units a little longer.

As there were no more questions, the chairman closed the meeting with a request to members to show their appreciation for a useful and interesting presentation.