

Fire extinguishers – safe, dangerous or just mismanaged?

The debate about the safety of fire extinguishers, prompted by a somewhat perverse risk assessment made in relation to the presence of extinguishers in a Bournemouth residential care home in 2008, still appears to be dividing opinion amongst those charged with assessing and providing for our safety. To some, the risks associated with having fire extinguishers placed where untrained individuals could injure themselves through accidental (or deliberate) misuse outweighs the benefits of their presence in the event of a fire. To the fire services the need to have a first line of defence in the event of a fire is of paramount importance. As both positions have merit surely the question to be asked is not ‘should we have one and not the other?’ but ‘how do we achieve both?’

Interestingly, the debate focused on only one of a number of safety issues which have bedevilled fire extinguishers for years, issues particularly related to people at both ends of the age spectrum – the young and the elderly. There are risks inherent in the way extinguishers are positioned and located in buildings and these have been evident for years and yet little seems to have changed. For the public in general, whether in public buildings or private offices and workplaces, it could be argued that the greater dangers are those posed by extinguishers being dislodged from traditional wall mountings, knocked over from floor mounted stands,

removed to be used as doorstops (especially when used to prop open fire doors!) or tampered with in a variety of ways. These common hazards appear to have been largely ignored in this debate.

For the young fire extinguishers can often present a tantalising opportunity to cause mischief, particularly in schools, colleges and universities. Behaviour ranging from hi-jinx to wilful misuse and vandalism can result in an extinguisher being discharged, causing damage to property and injury to the perpetrators as well as others. Considerable inconvenience and cost is also incurred when a fire engineer is called in to refill/recharge and check the extinguisher/s, not to mention the risks associated with appliances rendered inoperative which can go undetected until the next fire engineer’s routine service call.

For the elderly, infirm and disabled there are undoubtedly risks associated with accidental damage or misuse as there can equally be with a good number of appliances which these groups have access to. But they are not simply removed to avoid people injuring themselves and, possibly, others but, instead, measures are put in place to minimise the risks. We don’t ban vehicles from our motorways because, for a variety of reasons, vehicles can leave the carriageway and end up in ditches or hit trees. Instead we put safety barriers up to mitigate against this eventuality.

Similarly, the case for protecting fire extinguishers is particularly strong in the most vulnerable environments and where the greatest potential hazard to health and safety arises. In these cases what is needed is a simple storage solution which will help overcome most, if not all, of these potential hazards. It seems illogical that safety equipment, such as first aid equipment, isn’t left to its fate by being placed in unprotected locations but fire extinguishers frequently are.

Extinguisher operational integrity should be seen as equally important and its protection against misuse or abuse provided for by being installed in specially designed tamper evident or alarmed cabinets. Fixed securely to a wall, such cabinets, typically consisting of a red back and transparent door, which readily allow visual checks of the contents without opening the door. A quick-release single door catch affords easy access but, at the same time, acts as a deterrent to opportunistic misuse, accidental dislodgement or removal for unauthorised purposes. A small hook on the wall can easily go undetected – an empty cabinet will immediately be seen as a cause for concern.

One company which has designed a particularly aesthetic solution is UK specialist storage cabinet manufacturer Jo Bird & Co Ltd. Cabinets such as the SOS101 and SOS201 have been designed specifically for use in buildings with access to the general public or where few, if any, people have been trained in extinguisher use. They are increasingly being installed in the education and children’s charity sectors where the health and safety of potentially vulnerable young people is involved.

In the education sector secondary schools appear to be confronting the issues involved with examples at Worcestershire County Council at Hanley Castle High School and the London Borough of Barking

and Dagenham. At Barking’s Eastbury Comprehensive School, Ecover, the facilities management company contracted to manage the school’s estate, was concerned at the growing burden on its vandalism budget prompting the installation of the first phase of a planned programme to adopt the more widespread use of protective cabinets. At bibic, a national charity for children with a wide range of learning difficulties, and The NAS’s Radlett Lodge School in Hertfordshire protective cabinets have recently been installed to improve the safety of children and their carers. Dundee City Council have recently installed special tamper-evident storage cabinets to house their defibrillator units.

Where the sick, elderly or infirm are concerned health risks associated with the spread of infection are a real issue. Eliminating of sources of infection in hospitals, health centres, nursing homes and hospices is now a major priority as the fight against MRSA and C-Diff and other hospital acquired infections is being stepped up. To support this drive, an antimicrobial property has now been added to an enlarged range of cabinets designed for housing first aid equipment as well as extinguishers. Using special plastics impregnated with silver ions virtually any bacterial contamination is rendered harmless when it comes into contact with the cabinets making them safe, effectively self-cleaning, and ideal for use in hospitals and other health service facilities. Why continue conducting a largely sterile debate when creative thinking, an innovative approach and the application of cutting-edge technology can provide the answers?

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