Fire Hazard in Neonatal Units in India: Let's Make a Start

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Sir,

The commentary [1] in November issue of Indian Journal of Pediatrics on fire safety in neonatal units was long overdue. The authors have critically analyzed the issue and have come up with comprehensive guidelines. A number of fire accidents in neonatal units throughout India have occurred in recent times, the most horrific being the fire in a Patiala based hospital [2].

The neonatal units are generally vulnerable for fire accidents in the hospitals due to the presence of oxygen and inflammable substances like alcohol. The existence of large number of heavy electrical equipment makes it additionally susceptible than any other place in the hospital. The guidelines offered in the commentary [1] are wide-ranging and have looked at the issue as a whole. In India, despite increasing awareness about the issue, these guidelines may remain largely unimplemented, primarily due to the lack of resources.

While it is extremely important to implement these guidelines as a whole, we also know it may not happen in most neonatal units in India because of lack of resources. But instead of waiting for the “right amount” of resources, we urgently need to make a start with whatever we have. Here are some simple, reasonable and low cost interventions, which may not be complete but would still help in reducing the risk of fires in neonatal units in India.

1. Keep an alternate and functional exit. Most of the neonatal units keep only single entry and exit point in order to restrict the entry of people.

2. The regular maintenance of equipments, especially overhead warmers. In almost all cases the fire seems to start from faulty electrical equipment.
3. *Heavy electrical wiring.* The electrical wiring in the nursery is usually done as for the rest of the hospital. Consequently it is insufficient to bear the load of large number of electrical equipments and heaters and becomes a vulnerable point.
4. *Increasing the number of electrical points.* In the absence of sufficient number of electrical points, extension boards are frequently used which becomes potential sparking point.
5. *Direct observation.* Many nurseries in India still run with the nursing station outside. This puts the infants at grave risk as they remain unattended and at the same time early signs of the disaster may be missed.
6. Training of the entire staff and the presence of evacuation plan in the event of fire. Lack of staff training and its consequences were amply demonstrated during another fire accident in Kolkata recently [3].

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