



California State Firefighters'
Association

California's Public Hospitals and Firefighters Urge Diligence to Prevent Winter-Related House Fires and Injuries

*Hospitals and firefighters see increase in burns, smoke inhalation
due to winter hazards; urge stronger precautions*

Oakland, CA, November 17, 2008 – The California Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems (CA PH) and its member hospitals, along with the California State Firefighters' Association (CSFA), are urging all Californians to take precautions to prevent house fires and burns and other injuries that are more prevalent in winter months.

In winter, fire departments see an increase in the percentage of fires and injuries caused by reasons not seen as often or at all during other times of years – causes such as space heaters, candles, and Christmas trees. Public hospitals see the result of these incidents when the victims of these incidents appear at their doors – often with life-threatening burns, smoke inhalation or other injuries.

“Last winter alone we had three children arrive with serious burns caused by Christmas trees that caught on fire,” said Yvonne Karanas, M.D., director of Santa Clara Valley Medical Center's Burn Center in San Jose. “We were all devastated to see these poor kids suffer, especially since we knew that these fires were preventable.” Santa Clara Valley Medical Center has a top-level burn center that typically sees patients from six surrounding counties and each year treats about 250 patients who require hospitalization. Six of California's public hospitals operate regional burn centers, which together represent more than half of all regional burn centers in the state.

“We think that many people probably know about these winter-related hazards,” said Kevin Nida, president of CSFA, “but they need to stay mindful of them at all times and take all necessary precautions. All it takes is one spark – especially if it's in the middle of the night – and a house can go up in flames in no time.”

Nationally, the winter months see the highest number of home fire deaths. During December, January and February, heating equipment is the leading cause of home fires, causing approximately 60,000 each year; space heaters are responsible for about two-thirds of home heating fire deaths. Candles are the second-leading cause of home fire injuries (after cooking), with December seeing almost twice the number of candle-related home fires than an average month.

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Lower-income populations are at greater risk for these winter-related fires – perhaps because they may be less able to afford heat or electricity, or smoke detectors. Public hospitals, whose patients are often low-income, may treat a greater proportion of winter-related house fire victims than do other medical facilities.

Fire officials have numerous tips to keep these winter-related fires from happening, as well as suggestions for how to escape a fire should one occur. CSFA's Nida recommends that all people be mindful of where they place space heaters and candles, and always having a plan for exiting the residence in the case of any kind of fire. He also pointed out that many local fire agencies will provide smoke detectors to those who cannot afford them.

Although most people may think of *burns* when they think of fire-related injuries, public hospitals see fire victims with other serious problems as well. "Smoke inhalation in particular can cause extreme damage to the lungs, and result in permanent health problems or even death," said Bruce Potenza, M.D., clinical director of the UC San Diego Regional Burn Center and associate professor of Surgery at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

Scald injuries also increase

Public hospitals also report an increase in scald injuries during the winter months, especially among young children. "Our burn center sees a definite uptick in scalds during winter, often among toddlers who get too close to a pot of hot soup or a space heater or other hot appliance," said Dr. Karanas. "Parents need to be especially vigilant when they have young children in the house, and take steps such as using only a stove's back burners to cook and keeping hot food and space heaters out of reach."

As part of their awareness efforts, CAPH and CSFA have produced educational materials that will be distributed in public hospitals' outpatient clinics and included on hospital Web sites.

"If, heaven forbid, anyone ever needs trauma care because of such a tragedy, we're here to provide the best possible treatment," said Dr. Potenza. "But we hope that our outreach efforts will keep many people from needing this care in the first place."

For more information, log onto www.caph.org or www.csfa.net.

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