Preventing Hospital Fires in India

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.