What went wrong?



A container of volatile flammable liquid fell to the floor in front of an electric heater. The vapors reached the hot element and started a flash fire and explosion. The blast killed one worker and injured another.

An incident such as this could have occurred in just about any industry or off-the-job setting. In this case, it happened at a long-term healthcare facility.

A maintenance worker had been repairing a hand-held hair dryer, securing the housing with an epoxy glue. He got some of the glue on his hands, and went looking for solvent to remove it. He walked to the paint room and found a container. He tipped the can to pour some of the liquid onto his hand. The can slipped off the work bench and fell to the floor. A co-worker who had accompanied him to the paint room made it out the door, but the first worker backed into a corner and was trapped by the fire. The explosion blew the door shut, and the fire spread outside the room as the liquid flowed out under the door.

Instead of sounding the alarm and summoning help, the co-worker tried to get back inside, but when he opened the door the fresh supply of oxygen further accelerated the fire.

Unable to reach the first worker, he crawled out of the building and made it to a nursing station in the hospital’s main building. At the time, he could not remember what had happened, having been affected by carbon monoxide from the fire in addition to burns.

An autopsy showed the first worker died of carbon monoxide poisoning and smoke inhalation. The fire was put out before it could reach the main building.

Could something like this go wrong at your healthcare facility? It could if anyone uses or stores flammable liquids or flammable gases near a source of ignition. Flammable liquids and gases must be handled safely and kept away from any substance or activity which could start a fire or make it burn much faster.

Ensure that everyone has proper training in the handling, storage and use of flammable materials. Make sure that your fire safety plan and emergency response plan are up to date, and that everyone from maintenance personnel to patient care staff, including physicians, are properly trained and that they participate in regularly scheduled fire drills.