Being a dentist, you will be familiar with the need to carry out regular checks on your patients to spot potential problems before they become major ones. This preventative approach should be applied to your fire safety procedures and equipment too. Just like any other business, complying with fire safety regulations is an obligation. By carrying out a fire risk assessment, you can secure the longevity of your business by reducing the likelihood of a fire starting, as well as preparing for the worst.

In fact, studies have shown that over 70 per cent of businesses that have been involved in a major fire either do not reopen or subsequently fail within three years. Fire prevention is far easier than trying to recover from a fire. More importantly, a fire risk assessment ensures the safety of your staff and patients. Thankfully, fully meeting the regulations is not as difficult as one might expect, but failing to do so comes with the risk of a large fine and even a prison sentence.

The five stages of a fire risk assessment

By completing a fire risk assessment, you will gain a full understanding of your business in terms of the activities that are carried out and the risks present. By going through the five steps, you will have made your dental surgery safer and compliant.

Step 1: Identify all potential combustibles and possible sources of ignition.

Step 2: Consider all the relevant people who are at greatest risk from fire.

Step 3: Remove or reduce the risks of fire as far as possible and take precautions.

Step 4: Prepare for an emergency with fire safety equipment, by providing correct training and by having a plan of which everyone is aware.

Step 5: Record any findings and regularly review the assessment to keep it up to date.

The risk assessment should be recorded at all stages, including the actions you have taken along the way. If you hire five or more members of staff, it is a requirement to have written proof that you have fulfilled your duty as a responsible business owner.

Dental practice fire hazards

For a fire to burn, it needs heat, fuel and oxygen. With one or more of those elements removed, a fire is instantly less likely to break out. Therefore, you need to identify those items that can burn and potential sources of a fire and keep them separated. Possible sources that can cause a fire are radiographic and other electrical equipment when they overheat, are misused or are faulty. This can be avoided with regular inspection and servicing by professionals. Heaters, cooking equipment and smoking materials are other risks. There is also the possibility of arson.

When looking around for potential fuel sources, there are many to consider, including medical supplies, toiletries, aerosols, furniture, clothing, cleaning products, and waste. In a dental practice, the oxygen stored in cylinders can be a fire and explosion risk if damaged or used incorrectly. It is therefore important to take particular care in their use and storage.

Identify those at risk

The next step is to consider the people who could potentially be present on your premises at the time of a fire. Of course, this includes staff and patients, but also take into consideration agency staff, contractors and other visitors to your practice. There may be particular individuals who would need assistance in making a swift escape in an emergency. Those with mobility issues, such as the elderly and disabled, are particularly at risk, as are children.
cally about the best way of getting those people safely down any stairs. You may find that an evacuation chair is vital, as is training staff in how to use such equipment.

Evaluate and act

Having now identified all of the potential problems and hazards that are present in your dental surgery, you can now take the relevant action to take precautions to reduce those risks as far as practically possible. The most reliable solution is installing fire detectors throughout the building and using smoke and heat detectors, along with call points, as part of a fire alarm system. When the alarm sounds, fire exit signs will then direct people to safety while emergency lighting illuminates that route to keep people safe, no matter what.

Having the correct fire extinguishing equipment installed throughout the premises is one of the best ways you can prepare. Fire blankets in the kitchen area will help tackle small fires with little mess or hassle, while fire extinguishers are best in waiting rooms, corridors, offices and treatment rooms. Water extinguishers are suitable for general fires, including paper, cardboard, rubbish and furnishings, whereas foam extinguishers can be used for flammable liquids. Powder extinguishers are versatile, lighter and safe to use around electrical equipment and flammable liquid and gas. However, they can affect visibility and breathing, so should be mitigated by a health and safety risk assessment if specified for indoor use. On electrical equipment, carbon dioxide extinguishers are the safest method and will prevent further damage to the electronics.

Each extinguisher needs to be partnered with an extinguisher identification sign and should be commissioned upon installation and then serviced annually by a trained professional.

Record, plan, inform, instruct and train

In order to deal with any fire situation, you need to have an emergency plan. This means that all staff will know what to do and ensure the premises are safely evacuated. Further ensure all new staff are informed of this and that it is easily accessible for anyone to view.

You will need to select at least a few members of staff you trust to take on fire warden responsibilities. Once they have received the appropriate training, you should then have plenty to ensure there is always a fire warden present in spite of sickness and holidays. The purpose of fire wardens is to help educate the other staff, besides taking charge in the event of an emergency. Their training will help them to act appropriately and calmly in a fire situation and to oversee the evacuation. They will also be on hand to help you with your fire safety duties, such as performing visual checks of equipment and leading fire drills to test the effectiveness of your procedures, and to help familiarise staff with the plan.

Lastly, inform all staff on how to use the fire extinguishing equipment in your surgery.

Review

A risk assessment is never finished, and you should constantly monitor what you are doing to see how effectively the risks are being controlled. It also needs updating should there be a change in building layout or the activities that are carried out. Acquiring a new piece of equipment may seem like just a small change, but together, a few small changes can have a significant effect. That is why many fire services recommend reviewing the assessment at least once a year so you know it is up to date. The ultimate responsibility for complying with special fire safety regulations falls to the owner of the dental practice. He or she can either carry out the fire risk assessment himself or herself or ask a competent individual to assist. Many business owners choose to hire professional risk assessors to complete it on their behalf. This not only saves them time and effort, but also gives them the peace of mind that it has been done correctly and that no risks have been overlooked...

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