

Inside the renewed push to prevent surgical fires

(0:00 - 0:12)

Turning now to GMA Investigates and a warning about fires in the O.R. even during the most routine surgeries. And ABC's Gio Benitez joins us again with more on the important questions you need to ask before you go under. Hi there, Gio.

(0:12 - 0:19)

Hey there, Paula. Something as minor as a mole removal surgery could lead to a very scary disaster. Fire on the operating table.

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And right now, we're getting a firsthand look at the shocking error this morning. GMA Investigates. We've heard the operating room horror stories.

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Instruments left in patients. The wrong body part being operated on. But there's one medical error you may have never heard of that's instant and devastating.

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Surgical fires. Fire. Fire.

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That's when a patient undergoing surgery catches on fire on the operating table. Katherine Reuter's mother was injured after going in for minor surgery in 2002. My mother was burned on her face, neck, shoulder, eyes, and ear.

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According to the hospital, vapours from a flammable alcohol-based skin prep that was still wet on her skin ignited on her face. I couldn't believe in the U.S. we could actually set a patient on fire during surgery. Reuter now uses her story to educate others through a website dedicated to prevention.

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This hazard has to stop. We know how to prevent it. We know what causes it.

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Mark Brewley, who has been studying surgical fires for more than 40 years, says most of these

fires are sparked when oxygen pumped to the patient meets an ignition source, like a laser, and some kind of fuel, like fabric. But he points to a problem, saying some patients don't even need this added oxygen, and those who do are often pumped with higher concentrations than necessary. So here we're simulating with a mannequin.

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GMA Investigates at ECRI Lab for a fiery demonstration. We have a patient. Brewley uses a material that acts like human skin over the surgical area.

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Oxygen flows to the mannequin through a non-flammable tube, and once the oxygen builds up, watch what happens when the medical tool hits the skin. Whoa. Oxygen off, please.

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And what we have is damage to the patient's skin. The fire also burned underneath and scorched other areas along the upper chest. Whoa.

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And depending on the amount of oxygen, you could also wind up with burns to the cheek, the eyes, the chin, the nose. Though there has been a nearly 65 percent decline in surgical fires over the last 10 years, Brewley warns that even one preventable accident in the operating room is one too many. To those who say, you know what, all of these accidents are down dramatically, what do you say? Certainly they're down, but to 20 or 30 patients a year who wind up with severely facial disfiguring injuries, or the one or two patients a year who die, that is not unimportant to them.

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The Council on Surgical and Perioperative Safety tells ABC it does not think oxygen during surgery should be regulated, that every patient who comes to the OR is different, adding this issue should not be taken away from well-trained doctors and nurses. A few simple questions might make the difference. You as a patient could ask, are you going to give me oxygen on my face? Do I really need it, or can you get by with air? That is part of the process for eliminating this hazard.

(3:28 - 3:49)

And the American Society of Anesthesiologists has been recognised for its efforts to educate the healthcare community about surgical fires, and they tell us that while anaesthesia is safer than ever, it continues as a top priority, so patients really should ask whether that facility has a protocol or plan in place to identify and prevent these fires. Yeah, arm yourself with this information. Gio, thanks again for bringing that to our attention.

(3:50 - 4:05)

Well, hey there, GMA fans, Robin Roberts here. Thanks for checking out our YouTube channel. Lots of great stuff here, so go on, click the subscribe button right over here to get more of awesome videos and content from GMA every day, anytime.

(4:06 - 4:09)

We thank you for watching, and we'll see you in the morning on GMA.