Hotels Could be Hazardous to your Health

By Captain RH Kaufman, Los Angeles County Fire Dept.

There are over 6,000 hotel fires per year. Have you ever been in a hotel during a fire? It's a frightening experience, and you should start thinking about it. For instance, how would you have acted if you had been in one of these fires?

-The Gulf Hotel, Houston, Texas 54 DEAD
-The La Salle Hotel, Chicago, Illinois 61 DEAD
-The Wincoff Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia 119 DEAD

Of course, there have been hundreds more with thousands of deaths, but the majority did not have to die. My wife works in the airline industry and while accompanying her on a recent trip, I learned how ill-prepared she was for a hotel fire. It's not her fault; it's actually quite common. Hotels, however, have no excuse for being ill prepared, but you can't depend on the staff in case of a fire. History has shown some hotels won't even call the Fire Department. I have been a firefighter in Los Angeles for over 12 years and have seen many people die needlessly. It's sad because most could have saved themselves.

What you're about to read is the same "briefing" I've given my wife on hotel safety. It may shake you a little, but I've done my job if it helps you remember how to react...

Contrary to what you've seen in the movies, fire is not likely to chase you down and burn you to death. It's the bi-products of fire that will kill you. Superheated fire gasses (smoke) and panic will almost always be the cause of death long before the fire arrives (if it ever does). It is imperative that you know how to avoid smoke and panic to survive a hotel fire.

With this in mind, here are a few tips:

Smoke: Where there is smoke, there is not necessarily fire. A smoldering mattress, for instance, will produce great amounts of smoke. Air conditioning systems will sometimes pick up smoke from one room and carry it out to other rooms or floors.

Keep this in mind because 70% of hotel fires are caused by smoking and matches. In any case, your prime objective should be to leave at the first sign of smoke.

Smoke will start accumulating at the ceiling and work its way down. The first thing you will notice: THERE ARE NO "EXIT" SIGNS. This is because you can't see them. So keep in mind when you have smoke, it's too late to start looking for "exit" signs.

You should be aware that smoke is terribly irritating to the eyes and your eyes will only take so much irritation before they close. Try all you want, you won't be able to open them if there's still smoke in the area. It's one of your body's compensatory mechanisms. Lastly, the fresh air you want to breathe is at or near the floor. Get on your hands and knees (or stomach) and STAY THERE as you make your way out. Those who don't stay low won't get far. Think about this poor man's predicament for a moment: He wakes at 0230 hrs to the smell of smoke. He runs into the hallway only to be greeted by heavy smoke. He has no idea where the exit is. He runs to the right. He's coughing and gagging, his eyes hurt. "Where is it?" "WHERE IS IT?!" Panic begins to set in. He then thinks maybe he's going the wrong way, his eyes close. He can't find his way back to his room (it wasn't so bad in there). His chest hurts, he desperately needs oxygen. Total panic sets in and he is completely disorientated. He cannot hold his breath any longer. We find him DEAD at 0250.

What caused all the smoke? It was a small fire in a closet where they store rollaway beds. Remember, the presence of smoke does not necessarily mean the hotel is burning down.

Panic: Panic is the product of your imagination running wild and it will set in as soon as it dawns on you you're lost, disorientated, or you don't know what to do. Panic is almost irreversible: once it sets in, it seems to grow. Panic will make you do foolish things. People in a state of panic are rarely able to save themselves.

If you understand what's going on, what to do, where to go, and how to get there, panic will not set in. The man in the example above would not have died if he'd known what to do. For instance, had he known the exit was 4 doors down on the left, he could have gotten on his hands and knees, breathed fresh air and started counting doorways. Even if he couldn't keep his eyes open, he could feel his way as he crawled, counting the doors 1...2...3...BINGO! He would NOT have panicked. He'd be alive today, telling of his "great hotel fire" experience.

Exits: The elevator drops you at the 12th floor and you start looking for your room. "Let's see...room 1206...here it is". You open the door and drop your luggage. AT THAT VERY MOMENT, turn around and go back into the hallway to check your exit. You may not get another chance. Don't go into the bathroom, turn on the TV, straighten your appearance, or crash on the bed. I know you're tired and you want to relax, but it's essential...CRITICAL that you develop the HABIT of checking for your exit after you

drop your luggage. It won't take 30 seconds, and trust me, you may NEVER get another chance.

If there are 2 of you in a room, BOTH of you locate the exit. Talk it over as you find it. Is it on the left or right...do you have to turn a corner? Open the exit door. What do you see... stairs or another door? (There are often 2 doors to go through, esp. in newer hotels) Are you passing any rooms where your friends are staying? If there was a fire, you may want to bang on their doors. Is there anything in the hallway that would block your way...an ice-machine maybe? As you go back to your room, take a look once more. Get a good mental picture of everything. Could you get to the exit with a "blindfold" on?

This procedure takes less than a minute and it must become a habit to be effective. Those of you who are too lazy or tired to do it are real gamblers. Remember, there are over 6,000 hotel fires per year. The odds are sure to catch up with you.

Using Your Exit: Should you have to leave your room, it's important to close the door behind you. This is very effective in keeping out fire and will minimize smoke damage to your belongings. Recently an entire family died in a Los Angeles house fire. It was a large 3-bedroom house with a den and family room. That night, the occupants had left every door in the house open except one, and it had led to the washroom where the family dog slept. The fire quickly spread throughout the house, except for the washroom. The house was a total loss. When the fire was knocked down, firemen opened the door to find the family dog wagging his tail. Because the door was left shut, the dog and room were in fine shape.

Some doors take hours to burn through. They are excellent "fire stops" so close every door you go through. If you find smoke in the exit stairwell, you can bet people are leaving the doors open as they enter.

Always take your key with you. Get into the habit of putting the key in the same place every time you stay in a hotel. A hotel nightstand is an excellent location. It's close to the bed so you can grab it when you leave without wasting valuable time. It's important you close your door as you leave, and it's equally as important that you don't lock yourself out. You may find conditions down the hallway untenable and want to return to your room. If you're now in the habit of checking your exit and leaving the key on the nightstand, you're prepared to leave the hotel in case of a fire, so let's walk through it once. Something will awaken you during the night. It could be the telephone, someone banging on the door, the smell of smoke. But, whatever it is, investigate it before you go back to sleep (A popular motel near LAX recently had a fire and one guest later said he was awakened by people screaming but went back to bed thinking it was a party - he nearly died in bed!).

Suppose you wake up to smoke in your room. Grab your key on the nightstand, roll off the bed and head for the door on your hands and knees. Even if you could tolerate the smoke by standing, DON'T, you'll want to save your eyes and lungs as long

as possible. BEFORE you open the door, feel it with the palm of your hand. If the door or knob is hot, don't open it. The fire could be just outside (I'll talk about that later). If it's not hot, slowly open the door and peek into the hallway to "assess conditions" with your hand still on the door (in case you need to slam it shut).

As you make your way to the exit, stay against the wall on the side where the exit is. It is very easy to get lost or disorientated in a smoky atmosphere. If you're on the wrong side of the hallway, you might pass the exit. If you're in the middle of the hall, people who are running will trip over you. Stay on the same side as the exit and count doors as you go.

When you reach the exit and begin to descend the stairs it is very important that you WALK down and hang onto the handrail as you go. Don't take this point too lightly. People will be running, will knock you down, and you might not be able to get up. Just hang on and stay out of everyone's way. Now leave the building, cross the street and watch the action. When the fire is out and the smoke clears, you will be allowed to re-enter the building. If you closed your room door when you left, your belongings should be in pretty good shape.

Sometimes smoke will get into the exit stairway. If it's a tall building, the smoke may not rise very high before it cools and becomes heavy. This is called "stacking". If your room is on the 20th floor, for instance, you could enter the stairway and find it clear. As you descend you could encounter smoke that has "stacked". Do not try to run through it - people die that way. Turn around, walk up and hang onto the handrail. The people running down will probably be in a panic and could knock you down. They will run over anything in their way, including a fireman. Hang on and head up towards the roof (roofs have proven to be a safe secondary exit and refuge area).

If for some reason you try one of the doors to an upper floor and it's locked, don't worry, that's normal - exit stairwells are often designed so you can't enter from the street - this is for security purposes. When you reach the roof, prop the door with something (like a shoe, you can find something else later). This is the ONLY time you will leave a door open. Any smoke in the stairwell may now vent and you won't be locked out. Now find the windward side of the building (the wet finger method is reliable), have a seat and wait until they find you. Stay put. Firemen will always make a thorough search of the building looking for bodies. Live ones are nice to find.

Your Room: After you check your exit and put the key on the nightstand, there is one more thing for you to do. Become familiar with your room. Check your bathroom vent; all rooms have them, but some have electric motors. Should you decide to remain in your room, turn on the vent to help remove the smoke. Take a good look at the window in your room. Does it open? Does it have a latch, a lock? Now open the window and look outside.

What do you see? Ledges? How high up are you? Get a good mental picture of what's outside. It's important you know how to OPEN your window. Should you wake up

to smoke in your room and the door is too hot to open or the hallway is completely charged with smoke, don't panic. Many people have defended themselves quite well in their room and so can you. It could be dark and smoky in the room so you'll want to open the window to vent the smoke. Those who don't know how to open the window may throw a chair through it, but this is a horrible idea. If the window is broken and there is smoke outside, it will enter your room and you will be trapped. The broken glass from the window will also cut like a surgeon's scalpel. At a Ramada Inn fire, an airline captain on a layover threw a chair through the window and cut himself seriously. Don't compound your problems. Besides, if you break out your window with a chair, you could hit a fireman on the street below.

If there is fresh air outside, leave the window open, but keep an eye on it. At this point, most people stay at the window while their room continues to fill with smoke. If the fire burns through, this procedure is not conducive to longevity. You must be aggressive and fight back.

Here are some things you can do:

If the phone works, let someone know you're in there. A wet towel tied around your nose and mouth is an effective filter if you fold it in a triangle and put the corner in your mouth. Flip on the bathroom vent. Fill the tub with water (Don't get into it - it's for fire fighting. You'd be surprised how many people try to save themselves by getting into a tub of water - that's how you cook lobsters, so you know what happens!) Wet some sheets or towel, and stuff the cracks of your door to keep out the smoke. With your ice bucket, bail the water from the bath onto the door to keep it cool. Feel the walls - if they are hot, bail water onto them too. You can put your mattress up against the door and hold it in place with a dresser. Keep everything wet. Who cares about the mess? If you swing a wet towel around the room, it will help clear the smoke. If there is a fire outside the window, pull down the curtains and move anything combustible away from the window. Bail water around the window. Use your imagination and come up with some tricks of your own. The point is there shouldn't be any reason to panic - keep fighting until reinforcements arrive. It won't be long.

Elevators: There isn't an elevator in existence that can be used as a "safe" exit. In all states, by law, elevators can't be considered an "exit". They're complicated devices with a mind of their own. The problem is people often only know one way out - the way they came in - if that was an elevator, they are in trouble. Elevator shafts and machinery extends through all floors of a building and when the shaft fills with smoke, there are hundreds of things that could go wrong: Too many try to get on the elevator in emergencies - fights break out and people get seriously injured; hand operated elevators are not exempt - people fighting over controls have beaten some elevator operators. In addition, smoke, heat and fire do funny things to elevator call buttons, controls and emergency phones.

Case in point: Hotel guests in a New Orleans hotel were called on their room phones and notified of a fire on the upper floors. They were not in danger, but asked to evacuate the hotel as a precaution. Five guests decided to use the elevator. It was discovered later that the elevator only went down 3 floors and then for some reason started going up. It did not stop until it reached the fire floor. The doors then opened and were held open by smoke obscuring the photocell light beam. Upon search of the elevator, firemen noticed that every button had been pushed, probably in a frantic attempt to stop the elevator; in addition, they found the five guests who died of suffocation.

Firemen even succumbed to the wrath of elevators during a fire. Several New York firemen recently used an elevator when responding to a fire on the 20th floor. They pushed button 18, but the elevator passed by the 18th floor and opened on the 20th floor to an inferno. It remained open long enough to kill all the firemen. The doors then closed and the elevator returned to the lobby.

Moral: If you have any idea that there might be smoke or fire in your hotel, avoid the elevator like the plague.

Jumping: It's important I discuss jumping because so many people do it. Most are killed or injured in the process. I cannot tell you whether or not you should jump. Every fire, although similar, is different. I can tell you, however, what usually happens to "jumpers". If you're on the 1st floor, you could just OPEN the window and climb out. From the 2nd floor you could probably make it with a sprained ankle, but you must jump out far enough to clear the building. Many people hit windowsills and ledges on the way down, and go into cartwheels. If they don't land on their head and kill themselves, they're seriously injured. If you're 3rd floor or higher, chances are you won't survive the fall. You're better off fighting the fire. Also, nearby buildings seem closer than they really are and many have died trying to jump to a building that looked 5 feet away, but was actually 15 feet away.

Panic is what causes most people to jump. There was a fire in Brazil a few years ago where 40 people jumped from windows and all 40 died. Ironically, 38 of those jumped after the fire was out. Many people have survived by staying put whilst those around them jumped to their death. It is best to resist panic, think clearly and use your best judgment.

Calling the Fire Department: Most hotels will not call the Fire Department until they verify there really is a fire and try to put it out themselves. Should you call the reception to report a fire, they will always send the bellhop, security guard, or someone else to investigate. Hotels are VERY reluctant to "disturb" their guests, and fire engines in the streets tend to draw crowds and are quite embarrassing.

In the New Orleans hotel fire, records show that the fire department received only one call, from a guest in one of the rooms. The desk had been notified of the fire 22

minutes earlier and had sent a security guard to investigate. His body was later found on the 12th floor about 10 feet from the elevator.

If you want to report a fire or smell of smoke, ask the hotel operator for an outside line for a local call. Call the Fire Department and tell them your room number if you need to be rescued. You need not feel embarrassed, that's what we're here for. We would much rather come to a small fire or smoking electrical device than be called 20 minutes later after 6 people have died. Don't let hotel "policy" intimidate you! The hotel may be upset, but really... who cares. The fire department will be glad you called and you may have saved many lives.

Well, the rest is up to you. You can be well prepared by developing these safe habits and condition yourself to react in an emergency.