**Fire Safety Abroad**

*By Bill Frederick, Lodestone Safety International*

U.S. students going abroad come from an OSHA certified world where torte law ensures that anyone with potential responsibility for injury has a stake in preventing accidents. The big upside of this is that we have far fewer accidental deaths than we might otherwise. The downside is that our students have been deprived of the opportunity to develop the risk management skills necessary to navigate a goodly portion of the low and middle-income world.

I was in a typical Bhutanese hotel last year. There were 6 floors and only one stairwell winding around the one elevator. There were no fire escapes, sprinkler systems, smoke alarms, evacuation diagrams or fire extinguishers. There were candles and matches provided for guests in each room. When I visited the local fire department, it was apparent that their ladders would not reach beyond the third floor and they’d only have access to those windows that opened onto the street.

At the U.S. State Department’s Foreign Service Institute, they show a video to folks preparing to live overseas as part of their training. The video graphically depicts the Station Nightclub fire in RI in 1993. In about 4 minutes the sounds of voices inside stop. In 5 minutes the building is engulfed in flames. 100 people were killed and they were all awake and on the ground floor when the fire started.

Underdeveloped infrastructure and a lack of torte law is just part of the risk profile for international travel. Fortunately, there are a host of interventions that may used to reduce the risk of fire injuries or deaths both in hotels and dormitories.

Using Gerald Wilde’s *Target Risk* (i.e., risk management systems may be impacted by education, engineering, and legislation), let’s *Educate* first. Ensure that part of your orientation effort conveys that students are “not in Kansas” anymore. Foster their situational awareness regarding torte law and infrastructure. When at the hotel, point out the lack of alternate routes, sprinklers, etc. Take 10 minutes and have a fire drill. Feel for heat at the door before opening, stay low to the floor, smoke kills more people than fire, etc.

*Engineer.* First off, try to locate hotels that have fully-developed fire precautions. Book rooms on the lower floors if breaking and entering is not a major concern, and get rooms facing roads that fire trucks can access. Bring battery-operated smoke detectors with you—mini-adjustable curtain rods can be used to ensure detectors are at ceiling level above the door or window frames. If you are setting up in a dormitory, it might warrant the expense of
obtaining chain ladders in lieu of fire escapes, installing smoke detectors and drawing up evacuation plans with accompanying fire drills.

*Legislate.* In a country where candles are provided in every hotel room, the locals have been using candles their whole lives, unlike your students. They likely are much more aware of the consequences of inattention or of falling asleep after drinking too much. You could make rules about not using candles or smoking in the room if you haven’t already engineered it by asking the hotel to remove candles and matches from student rooms before arrival.

Students may complain about feeling infantilized and having flashbacks to grade school fire drills. However, if you point out that 95% of all fatal fires occur in low and middle income countries, largely due to the lack of precautionary measures that they take for granted in the U.S., it may be more palatable.