

A BURNING ISSUE

Push is on for fire-resistant sleepwear for kids

By Joan Lowy

Denver Rocky Mountain News (Scripps Howard News Service)

David Borowski was only 6 weeks old when his life was changed forever.

It was 1954 and Borowski was sleeping in a bassinet next to a vaporizer in his family's house in Buffalo, N.Y. The family dog chewed through the vaporizer's electrical cord, which shot sparks onto the bassinet, setting it and Borowski's clothing on fire.

He wound up with second- and third-degree burns over 80 percent of his body. He lost his right hand. On his left hand he has two "half-fingers" and a thumb. His earliest memories as a child are of lying in a hospital bed while his father gently rubbed his right foot. The foot had melted into a ball in the fire, and it took surgery to uncurl it enough so that he could walk. It was one of more than 50 operations he would have.

"Pain and I are old friends," Borowski, a Vienna, Va., resident, said without bitterness. "We've walked a few miles together."

Borowski—who has a master's degree in economics, is married and is the corporate finance reporting and information manager for the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Association—is one of several burn survivors who have gone public with their stories in an effort to persuade the federal government to reverse a decision permitting untreated cotton sleepwear for children on the market for the first time since the 1970s.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission decided in 1996—over the objection of the hospital burn centers and fire-safety advocates—to allow the sale of 100 percent cotton pajamas for children over 9 months so long as they are snug-fitting.

The commission also decided to eliminate any fire-resistance standard for infant sleepwear ages 9 months and under.

The commission staff contends that snug-fitting pajamas are safe because they are less likely than billowy clothing to come into contact with open flames and they don't allow pockets of air to form between the garment and a child's skin, reducing the amount of oxygen available to feed a fire.

The infant standard was eliminated based on the belief that infants are not at risk for fires that begin on their clothing because they generally aren't mobile and therefore don't come into contact with open flames, commission spokesman Russ Raider said.

"It's important that people realize that fires can go to infants and that infants don't necessarily have to go to fires," Borowski countered.

Raider said no garment, even fire-resistant polyester or cotton treated with fire retardant, can save a child from burns in a house or a crib becomes engulfed in flames.

But Borowski said, “If even one life can be spared what I endured, that makes the standard worthwhile.”

Incidents of children who are seriously burned in their sleepwear because their clothing brushed against flames or because they were playing with matches have become rare—only about 80 cases a year, according to the commission.

Burn-care and fire safety officials admit that finding a case that also involves the new cotton sleepwear is like “looking for a needle in a haystack.” Most hospital emergency rooms and fire and rescue departments do not routinely report such detailed information.

But burn and safety officials say they fear a return to a time when children horribly burned in their sleepwear was a national scandal.

At least one prominent burn surgeon said that in the past year he has treated possibly as many as seven cases of young children burned in clothing fires while wearing clothing permitted under the new standard.

Dr. David Herndon, chief of staff at the Shriners Burns Hospital in Galveston, Texas, said the cases include three children ages 2 to 5 and four infants who incurred serious burns over 15 percent to 80 percent of their bodies.

Herndon presented the cases to the General Accounting Office. Congress has directed the agency to determine whether the new standard has resulted in any deaths or injuries.

Herndon said he can’t vouch for all the circumstances under which the fires occurred, but he feels confident that children are in jeopardy as a result of the revised standard.

“I’m just one burn surgeon at one burn center out of 135 burn centers and I found these cases, so it seems to me that there are going to be more cases,” Herndon said.

Sleepwear and Fire Safety

Facts and figures on children’s sleepwear and the dangers of fire:

Before 1972, about 1,000 children a year were seriously burned in clothing-related fires, and about 60 children a year died.

- ❑ After children’s sleepwear was required to be made from flame-resistant polyester or treated cotton, burn injuries dropped more than 90 percent and deaths plummeted to four a year or less.

- ❑ Between 200 and 300 children a year are seriously burned while wearing oversize cotton T-shirts and other nonresistant garments not intended as sleepwear.
- ❑ The Consumer Product Safety Commission eliminated any fire-resistance standard for infant sleepwear effective Jan. 1, 1997.
- ❑ Two types of sleepwear are allowed to be sold for children sizes 9 months to 14x: flame-resistant material such as polyester and snug-fitting cotton.
- ❑ Snug-fitting garments should fit closely at the ankles, wrists, waist, seat and upper arms to prevent air pockets between the garment and a child's skin that might feed oxygen to fire.
- ❑ The Safe Children's Sleepwear coalition—which is made up of burn-care, trauma-care and fire safety organization—opposes the sale of untreated cotton sleepwear even if it is snug-fitting.

Source: Consumer Product Safety Commission, Trauma Foundation at San Francisco General Hospital.