

COPY OF MARY CREAGH MP's 10 MINUTE RULE BILL INTRODUCED TO PARLIAMENT ON 29th MARCH 2006

29 Mar 2006 : Column 871

Prevention of Scalding Injuries (Bathing in the Home)

1.32 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the installation in homes of thermostatic mixing valves to set bath tap water temperature to a maximum of 46 degrees centigrade; and for connected purposes.

I would like to tell the House a story about a little girl called Holly Devonport from Wakefield. Holly was five years old when she suffered scalds to more than half her body. Her mother, Julie, was running a bath and went to get a fresh towel. Holly was perched on the edge of the bath, playing with her Gameboy, and in the split second when her mother left the room, she slipped and fell in. Her mother said that when she pulled Holly from the bath her legs looked like they had been dipped in acid. Holly's agonising injuries meant that she endured a seven-hour operation to graft skin from her stomach on to her legs. She spent six weeks in Pinderfields hospital in Wakefield and six months in a wheelchair. She missed four months of school. She will be scarred for life. I know that many hon. Members in the Chamber met Holly and her mother yesterday and I am grateful to them for their support.

Holly is now 10 years old and yesterday she and her mother came to this place to launch the "Hot Water Burns Like Fire" campaign. The campaign is backed by Age Concern, the British Burns Association, the Child Accident Prevention Trust, the Children's Fire and Burn Trust, Help the Aged and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. They, and I, want to make sure that what happened to Holly does not happen to another child.

Unfortunately, what happened to Holly is happening to another child every single day of the year. Some 600 people a year suffer severe injuries from scalding hot bath water and three quarters of them are children under five. Fifteen pensioners a year die from burns that they receive from bath water. Why are pensioners and children the most vulnerable to scald injuries? The answer is because their skin is thinner and burns more quickly. Also, as any parent of a toddler will know, children have less perception of risk. Pensioners have less physical ability to deal with dangerous situations.

I have heard stories of children dropping toys into the bath and going in to get them and of pensioners getting cramp in their legs while topping up their baths with hot water. Someone e-mailed me this morning to share the story of her mother, who was due to go to a wedding and who was staying in a hotel. She turned on the hot bath tap and was scalded to death by the hot water. She went into burns-related shock. A person might have an epileptic fit, a heart attack or a stroke. They might drink too much or be on drugs and pass out in the bath. Those are everyday accidents, but they have extraordinary and catastrophic consequences for the individual.

My Bill would change the law so that thermostatic mixing valves, or TMVs, are fitted in all new and refurbished homes. Those valves would set the bath tap water temperature to a maximum of 48°C and it would emerge at about 46°C, depending on the water pressure elsewhere in the home. Let me put those temperatures in context. At 66°C, hot water burns through skin in two seconds. At 56°C, it takes 15 seconds. At 46°C, the temperature at which the valves would be set, it takes five minutes. If Members measure their own scalding hot baths they will find that the temperature is about 40°C. Nobody can sit in a bath at 46°C, but that temperature would allow people to buy time. I pay tribute to the district council in Wakefield, which, as far as I can establish, is the only council in the country to install the valves as standard across all its housing stock.

Legislation requiring homes to have TMVs comes into force in Scotland in May. Similar legislation has been passed in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Why can we not do the same in England, Wales and Northern Ireland? We have an opportunity approaching. I understand that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are about to launch a joint public consultation on building regulation G, to look at water-saving devices in bathrooms and water fittings in bathrooms. I plead with the Minister to widen the scope of that consultation to include the installation of TMVs. I thank him for taking the time to meet me earlier this week and I would be grateful if he would meet me later to talk with the representatives of the campaign leaders and the organisations involved about the nature of the injuries that they see.

There may be shouts from the tabloids about the nanny state. There were shouts when we banned hairdryers from bathrooms, put fuse boards on electrical circuits, and passed laws to protect people from carbon monoxide poisoning from gas boilers. Dr. Keith Judkins, a consultant anaesthetist from Wakefield, told me yesterday that a scald over more than one fifth of one's body has the metabolic impact of being hit by a bus. It causes huge changes in the body's chemistry, which can be life threatening. People can go into burns shock.

If the human consequences do not convince people, let us consider the economic and environmental costs. It costs £80—once—to buy a TMV. The lifetime cost to treat one scalding injury is £250,000. In one year, with TMVs, we could save £150 million for the NHS, and a lot of toddlers and pensioners a huge amount of suffering. In these days of rising gas prices, it simply does not make sense to superheat bath water and then mix it with cold water.

I am sure that all Members had a thermostat fitted to the showers that they used this morning. Nobody even thinks about thermostats on showers, but, for some reason, there is an incredible resistance to fitting them on bath taps. I doubt whether there is a person in the House who can say that they have not fallen asleep in the bath. Bath time should be about bubbles, ducks and fun—even at our age.

Baths should still be hot—baths will still be hot—but, most importantly, baths should be safe. Hot water burns like fire. Hot water burned Holly Devonport, to use her mother's words, "like acid". This year, 400 children will suffer what Holly endured. Are we really saying that that is the best that we can do for our children? We live in the 21st century. Thermostatic mixing valves were invented 80 years ago, so what are we waiting for? Let us act now to amend the building regulations and save lives so that we can all enjoy safe, hot baths.

1.40 pm