

# Devastating hospital fire in Hamburg raises issues of safety and staffing

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On Sunday night, June 1, a devastating fire broke out in the geriatric ward of the Marienkrankenhaus hospital in Hamburg. A 72-year-old woman and three male patients, aged 84, 85 and 87, died; 55 other patients were injured, some seriously.

The fire broke out on the first floor of the hospital, in the geriatric ward, reportedly because a confused 72-year-old had set fire to his pillow. The fire spread quickly to the neurology department, which is located above the geriatric ward on the second floor. The entire plastic-framed window in the geriatric ward was quickly engulfed in flames, the glass panes burst and the fire spread to the upper floor. Ultimately all four floors of the building were filled with smoke.

When the fire department arrived, they saw a terrible scene. “There were a number patients at the windows calling for help,” a fire department spokesperson told *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* radio. The rescue was difficult because the rooms and corridors were already full of smoke and fumes. The patients had to be evacuated with escape hoods through the completely smoke-filled corridors or, if they were reasonably mobile, via fire escapes.

Even the geriatric ward on the ground floor was difficult to access because of a light shaft in front of the basement windows below. Firefighters had to ascend 2.5 meters from there to reach the ground floor. The first fire department to arrive immediately called for reinforcements and eventually four fire engines with 160 firefighters and a further 60 rescue workers were on the scene.

The fire was extinguished after 20 minutes and the geriatric ward was completely evacuated. At the same time, the rest of the hospital continued to operate. Most of the injured, who mainly suffered from smoke inhalation, were treated immediately in the emergency

room of the same hospital.

With around 600 beds, the Catholic Marienkrankenhaus is one of the largest hospitals in Hamburg. Around 2,000 employees care for up to 100,000 patients a year in 14 wards and numerous outpatient facilities.

The blame was immediately laid upon the “culprit” who is said to have set fire to his pillow. He was admitted to a psychiatric hospital on Sunday evening by court order. However, the devastating fire raises completely different questions.

First of all, the question arises: Why was there no sprinkler system in place? Such an automatic extinguishing system could have prevented a major disaster and possibly saved the victims from suffocating since those asleep often do not smell a fire or only smell it when it is too late.

Another key question is: How many nursing staff were on site? It is well known that the situation in many hospitals in Germany is currently so wrought that departments are often understaffed. “Understaffed and underpaid,” as the nursing staff repeatedly emphasize. Especially at night, it can happen that a single registered nurse is responsible for dozens of patients. This has been accepted for years while the pressure on nursing staff is continuously increasing.

Another question arises due to the rapid spread of the fire and the large amount of smoke on several floors: Were there flammable and hazardous substances with toxic effects that were stored incorrectly? The plastic window facades were apparently also flammable and highly dangerous.

This raises the question of regular and preventive checks and inspections by fire safety experts. But while the German police and armed forces are being massively upgraded under the false slogan of

“security,” cuts and austerity measures continue to be made in the prevention of civilian dangers, as in the entire public sector.

The responsible authorities and the hospital management itself hardly pose these questions—quite the contrary. By quickly blaming a mentally disturbed senior citizen, the central questions are not even being asked. This shows once again how necessary it is for employees to organize themselves, set up independent committees and network across companies in order to put people’s lives and safety—and not profit—first.



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