

TO: Mayor Josh Morgan, London City Councillors

FROM: Mary-Ann Jack-Bleach

August 26, 2023

RE: 14<sup>th</sup> Meeting of City Council, August 29, 2023, Item 6.1. Fireworks By-Law Options

Dear Mayor and Members of Council,

I was at the Public Participation meeting on August 15<sup>th</sup>, and spoke specifically about the distress random, loud fireworks cause both myself and my pets. I have lived in London for 36 years. This past year has been the worst. They go off throughout the year on any day of the week and usually after midnight. I listened to the passionate pleas from the London Hindu Community who supported Option A. I felt empathy for their pleas and thought "why couldn't Option B be approved, and sparklers / spinning wheels be allowed to be used during Diwali."

Ever since that meeting, I have experienced a feeling of what I can only describe as sadness and concern about people continuing to celebrate fireworks in a private setting. I felt unsettled. Only last night, 10 days after the Public Meeting, I became suddenly aware of why I had been feeling that way. An image popped into my mind and then the content around it resurfaced too. My memory goes back 43 years. I must have suppressed this traumatic memory for the past 41 years as it took about 2 years for the memory to fade after the event.

In 1980, I was in my third year studying Occupational Therapy. I was doing a 6 week practical placement at Tygerberg Hospital in Bellville, South Africa. A referral came in for bilateral foot drop splints. I went to measure the lower extremities of a beautiful young women in her early thirties. She was married and they had two young children. She had sustained third degree burns over most of her body. Her sari and head covering had caught fire accidentally and literally engulfed her in flames within seconds. The only areas where her skin had sustained burns was where the fabric had melted on to her skin. Her face, left hand and both lower aspects of her legs below her knees were hardly affected. The doctor had written in the file, that he believed she only had enough time to try and pull at her sari with her right hand before losing consciousness. I measured her for the foot drop splints and talked to her throughout, even though she was deeply unconscious. She was not reactive at all to my touch, or moving of her limbs slightly as I took measurements. The Nursing Sister had advised me she was heavily sedated due to her severe pain. Later that day, I returned to fit the splints on her. I spoke to her Nurse about precautions regarding pressure point areas. The expression on the Nursing Sister's face changed and then she took a few deep breaths before she spoke. She apologized that she had not seen me before I went in. Then she quietly told me that my patient had passed away about half an hour ago. (That was before I had returned to fit the splints).

I was young and devastated. The image of my patient's exquisite young face haunted me for a few years afterwards. During that time, I wondered how her husband and children were

doing? It had been a terrible accident. Several families had been together enjoying fireworks during Diwali. Two other women who had tried to help her had also experienced burns. They were also in the unit. I was happy to hear a few months later that they had both survived. I learned that many women were experiencing burns that summer around firepits in South Africa. The cause was attributed to the inflammable material their dresses or beach coverings were made of. I think it was kaftan, but I cannot be sure? I became hyper-vigilant about warning women who wore summer dresses I thought were made with this inflammable material. I was particularly concerned about my mother and sisters who liked colourful, loose fitting dresses in warm weather. It became an overwhelming concern. I couldn't understand why this wasn't prevented through public education or making material that had fire retardant in it. Thank goodness, this event eventually disappeared from my thoughts. Until the past 24 hours.

I recently read up on the topic to see if any improvements have been made to the sari material. The most helpful read was a personal article titled, Lessons from a Sari on Fire by Shefalee Vasudev, dated November 26, 2020. She wrote *"In the days following Diwali, I called a few textile experts and designers who pointed out certain basic facts about flammable qualities of different fibres and fabrics. Alongside, I researched the subject in detail. All fabrics will burn and ultimately it is the responsibility of the wearer to take utmost precaution. You should know what material you are wearing if you are going to be in flammable environments."* She ends her article with some myth busting facts from her research.

I must add that cooking fires cause more burn injuries than fireworks, and always have. I hope firework burns are a small statistic now, but even so, one injury affects a family 100%. I hope no-one has to see what I did in the burn unit in 1980.

My purpose for sharing this memory now is to ask people, to be careful. And, to request that Council implement a consumer ban on the sale and detonation of fireworks in private settings, so that they may be left in the hands of professionals. Fireworks have the potential to be lethal.

Sincerely,

Mary-Ann Jack-Bleach

Ward 3