

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE LAB KIND

THE SANTAYANA REPORT

George Santayana was a Spanish-American philosopher, essayist, poet, and novelist. In 1905, he penned the famous aphorism “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” More than a century later, the saying reverberates with professionals the world over. The following is a summary of a recent incident at Columbia University. The information presented is intended to provide awareness and help readers plan against the occurrence of a similar situation in their laboratory or work area.

Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire

One evening a burning smell was noticed in a laboratory and upon further investigation by the lab occupants smoke was discovered coming from the sterilization oven in a nearby autoclave room. Without hesitation, the occupants evacuated the lab, activated a fire alarm pull station and notified Public Safety who in turn notified the New York City Fire Department (FDNY). Upon arrival of the FDNY, the oven door was opened and the fire extinguished. Fortunately there were no injuries or fire damage other than to the oven itself. Upon further review it was determined that a plastic container was placed in the oven to dry. Occupants of the lab explained that placing plastic containers in sterilization ovens were a normal practice and that the oven temperature was always on a low setting. However, observations made at the time of the fire indicated that the temperature dial had been turned up to a high setting, which resulted in the combustible plastic containers burning.

Lessons Learned

- The manufacturer’s instructions for the sterilization oven clearly states, **“Do not place explosive, combustible or flammable materials into the chamber”**. Manufacturer’s instructions are written with safety in mind, and adhering to those instructions can protect life and property. Always read and understand the manufacturer’s instructions before operating any piece of equipment.
- It’s also important to note that manufacturers may not replace or repair equipment under warranty that is operated contrary to their instructions.

For further information on this or any other safety related matter, please contact the [EH&S office](#).