

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.

Needle Stick

A laboratory support worker was inadvertently stuck with a needle after it was inappropriately discarded into a regular laboratory trash bag. The needle punctured the worker's skin when the trash bag was removed from its bin. In this case, the needle contained a benign mixture of two chemicals that are not known to be significantly hazardous; in rare, more serious cases, a needle stick may risk the spread of infectious disease and the need to administer antiretroviral drugs, which are often accompanied by uncomfortable side effects. At a minimum, these exposures can be both physically traumatizing and anxiety-producing to the people affected. Fortunately, when proper precautions are observed, needle stick incidents are nearly 100% preventable.

Lessons Learned

- For the safety of all personnel in the laboratory, all instruments defined as “sharps”, including needles, pipettes, pipette tips, razor blades, and any other laboratory instrument that could puncture a soft trash bag must be carefully discarded in a rigid sharps container (examples pictured at right).
- Glassware may also be a hazard if placed into the regular trash. Uncontaminated laboratory glassware should be discarded into cardboard boxes designated for uncontaminated laboratory glassware recycling, which can typically be obtained through an on-campus laboratory stock room or through your preferred laboratory supply vendors. Contaminated glassware, such as those with non-removable chemical residue, must be discarded into the blue, rigid cylindrical bins provided by Environmental Health & Safety by request through the [Hazardous Chemical Waste Pickup Request form](#).



Clean, uncontaminated glassware.



Glassware contaminated with chemical residue.

For further information on this or any other safety related matter, please visit www.ehs.columbia.edu.