

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.

No good deed goes unpunished

While working in a tissue culture room shared by multiple labs, an investigator observed an overloaded sharps container that had serological pipettes jutting out of the top. The investigator attempted to rearrange the contents of the container so that it could be closed, and was stuck by a needle in the container. The investigator’s lab performs research with viral vectors that encode growth promoting genes, which could be oncogenic following a percutaneous injury. Fortunately the needle involved in the accident was not of the design used by this lab; other labs do not use materials that carry this risk. Nonetheless the stuck investigator notified his Principal Investigator, received a medical evaluation at Workforce Health and Safety and filed an incident report form. The Principal Investigators who share this tissue culture room were notified of the accident and the importance of not overfilling sharps containers.



Lessons Learned

- Sharps containers should never be overfilled such that the contents require rearranging in order to close the container. In the event that the contents do need to be rearranged a set of tongs should be used to avoid placing hands near the sharps. EH&S provided the lab with a set of disposable plastic food-service tongs that could be used should the situation recur.
- Because of their shape and size, serological pipettes tend to clutter sharps containers. Using a sharps container dedicated to serological pipettes, and pitched a slight angle, enables these thin plastic objects to be stacked efficiently, maximizing the room in the container and saving costs associated with disposing of regulated medical waste.

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