

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.

The Man with the Glowing Gloves

Without removing their gloves, and before conducting a contamination survey, a researcher exited a laboratory and walked down the hall, up the stairs, and into another laboratory. After returning to the source laboratory, the researcher surveyed the work area with a Geiger counter and realized the workstation, their gloves, and lab coat were contaminated with a radioisotope. The researcher inadvertently spread radioactive contamination outside of the source laboratory when they exited the laboratory without removing their protective gloves.

After clearing the researcher of personal contamination, Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) carefully retraced the steps of the researcher in order to survey for and remove any contamination found in or outside of the source laboratory. Contamination was found on the stairwell doors, two freezers, a workbench, and the outside of a radioactive waste container. To prevent the further spread of contamination, the contaminated areas were secured and decontaminated by EH&S before being released back to the affected laboratories.

Lessons Learned

- Removing gloves and other potentially contaminated personal protective equipment (PPE) before leaving a laboratory space prevents the inadvertent spread of chemical, biological, and radioactive contamination into common areas where unprotected individuals may be unnecessarily exposed.

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