

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.

Clamping Down on Unattended Work

During routine overnight rounds Public Safety discovered a laboratory flooded with an unknown liquid. An unattended experiment sprung a leak, spilling several gallons of liquid onto the laboratory bench and surrounding floor. Visual identification of the liquid proved difficult, and with outdated contact information posted at the laboratory entrance, the incident response was further delayed. In the early morning hours, Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) reached a laboratory associate who responded, identified the liquid as water, and stopped the leak. The leak was not fully contained to the source laboratory, with a small quantity of water intruding on the floors below.

A loose connection between a hose and fitting on the laboratory equipment caused the leak. The repeated flexing of the hose while water was flowing was a contributing factor to the hose becoming dislodged from the fitting. The hose was initially connected snugly to the fitting, but was not secured with a hose clamp, zip tie, or other suitable means to maintain a secure connection during continuous operation.

Lessons Learned

- The operation of laboratory equipment overnight or otherwise unattended is strongly discouraged. Columbia University, however, has [established guidelines](#) for the safer operation of unattended processes and equipment. The guidelines place emphasis on identifying and eliminating or controlling potential failure points in a continuously operated system, in addition to providing 24-hour emergency contact information along with a description of the work to EH&S.
- Posting current 24-hour emergency contact phone numbers on laboratory entrance doors and sensitive equipment helps to facilitate a prompt response to any, but especially off-hours, emergencies. Please forward current 24-hour emergency contact phone numbers to your [Research Safety Specialist](#) if your 24-hour emergency contact information is outdated.

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