

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.

Walking Away

Serious injury was avoided during a recent incident through the use of lab-appropriate attire and personal protective equipment (PPE). A 500-milliliter bottle containing a corrosive chemical fell to the lab floor and shattered while being unpacked from its shipping container, splashing the affected lab worker on their feet. The lab worker evacuated the lab and removed their socks and shoes, then proceeded to rinse their feet with water for several minutes, using the eyewash deluge hose in an adjacent room. The lab worker walked away from the incident unharmed, avoiding chemical burns by wearing appropriate lab attire – closed-toe shoes and long pants – and following emergency procedures by thoroughly rinsing their feet with water.

Lessons Learned

- Wearing lab appropriate attire – closed-toe shoes and long pants – prevented the corrosive chemical from coming into direct contact with the affected lab worker’s skin. Closed-toe shoes and long pants [must always be worn](#) in the laboratory for this very reason.
- Always take great care when unpacking, [transporting](#), and handling chemicals. In this incident, the lab worker held the shipping container in one hand while attempting to remove the chemical bottle with the other. When the lab worker pulled the packing material out of the container, the chemical bottle slipped out and onto the floor. Shipping containers should always be unpacked on a stable work surface (e.g., lab bench) to minimize the risk of mishandling the container or its contents.

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