

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.

Protecting Your Waste, Protecting You

Sometimes a simple operation can turn hazardous when a combination of unpredictable factors and overlooked safety procedures occur simultaneously. Recently, a dangerous chemical spill occurred when an object protruding from the floor ruptured a full hazardous waste container that a laboratory worker was pushing across the floor without using a suitable cart or secondary container.

The laboratory worker intended to place the containers nearer the laboratory entrance to facilitate easier pickup for Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S), but did not anticipate this simple operation could turn hazardous. As a result, some of the hazardous waste spilled onto the floor, presenting a hazardous situation to the laboratory worker, and causing damage to the floor tiles and nearby equipment.

The laboratory worker remediated the spilled chemicals while wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), and with the help of another laboratory member, transferred the remainder of the hazardous waste into another container. Public Safety and EH&S were not notified of the incident until the following day. An EH&S Research Safety Specialist followed up with the laboratory to discuss the importance of keeping hazardous waste containers at the point of generation.

Lessons Learned

- EH&S Hazardous Materials Specialists will pick-up the waste from any accessible area in your lab. Keep tightly capped hazardous waste containers at or near the point of the hazardous waste’s generation (a.k.a. Satellite Accumulation Area). Moving waste away from the generation area increases the chances for spills and a potential exposure to hazardous materials. Careful attention to the [5 L’s of Hazardous Waste Management](#) will help ensure that your waste stays *in*, not on or around, your waste containers.
- If it is completely necessary to [move chemicals](#), the use of a cart with raised sides or durable secondary containers is essential.
- Notifying Public Safety and EH&S when a spill occurs is essential to ensure appropriate follow up takes place, even when the laboratory considers the spill to be manageable by the laboratory staff.

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