

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.*

It's Elemental

One year ago, in the October 2012 “Mercury Falling” Santayana Report, EH&S described a thermometer spill and contamination response, reminding the research community about the University’s mercury thermometer exchange program and mercury spill cleanup procedures. This October we are again reminded of the unique chemical and physical properties of elemental mercury that not only lend themselves to its widespread use in research devices, but also present challenges when the material is mishandled or spilled.

More recently EH&S responded to an elemental mercury spill in a departmental storage area. Upon investigation it was discovered that several mercury containing devices had released some or all of their contents. The equipment, which had been stored, unused for an undetermined length of time, was not readily accessible due to the large quantity of other material stored in the room. The multi-day clean up, like that of many mercury spills that are either greater than a standard-sized mercury thermometer or are not contained, was referred to the University’s emergency response contractor at a significant cost.

EH&S is committed to maintaining a safe work environment for all researchers and employees. In accordance with this commitment, EH&S has developed a mercury device registration program to ensure labs in possession of mercury-containing instruments register their type, quantity, location, and verify availability of a mercury spill kit to ensure staff have received requisite training to address a manageable mercury release. If your lab’s operations require the use of mercury-containing devices, please complete the information on the registration form located at:

<http://www.ehs.columbia.edu/MercuryRegistrationForm.pdf>

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