

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.

Don't Fear Safety Gear

During a routine Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) laboratory safety survey an undisturbed chemical bottle ruptured, unexpectedly releasing its contents. A majority of the released contents landed on an EH&S employee standing nearby. Fortunately the EH&S employee was wearing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and lab attire, including a lab coat, gloves, safety glasses, long pants and closed toe shoes. PPE was immediately removed and exposed areas rinsed, greatly reducing exposure. Upon follow-up with the laboratory, it was determined that task specific procedures had not been followed and a container filled with yeast and bleach, left to sit overnight, built up pressure resulting in the release.

Lessons Learned

- When working in a laboratory, always wear appropriate PPE and lab attire including a lab coat, gloves, safety glasses/goggles, long pants, and closed toe shoes. Just because someone is not working with a hazardous material doesn't mean they are not at risk of exposure to hazardous materials.
- All laboratory staff must be trained on task specific procedures, and have access to and understand laboratory standard operating procedures.
- Always follow proper decontamination procedures if exposed to hazardous materials. Be sure to wash exposed skin or flush exposed eyes with water for 15 minutes.

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