

Laboratory Accident Leads to Criminal Charges

Dr. Patrick Harran, a University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) chemistry professor, will face a criminal trial arising from a fatal laboratory accident occurring over four years ago. Sheri Sangii was working as a lab assistant in Dr. Harran's lab in December 2008. As she was carrying a plastic syringe containing t-butyl lithium from one sealed container to another, the syringe came apart. This compound ignites when exposed to air, and Sangii's synthetic sweater caught fire, resulting in severe burns. She was not wearing a protective lab coat at the time. Just five months previously, Ms. Sangii had graduated from Pomona College in Claremont with a bachelors' degree in chemistry. Eighteen days after the accident, Ms. Sangii died.

UCLA's investigation of the accident led to the strengthening of its lab safety procedures. The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health also investigated the accident and found that UCLA had inadequate training procedures and inadequate documentation of the training procedures that were used. The agency found that there were no willful violations of safety procedures by Dr. Harran or UCLA, but it nevertheless fined UCLA \$32,000.

The Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office next investigated the incident. Indictments were returned in December 2011 against Dr. Harran and the University of California Board of Regents. The case against the Board of Regents was settled in July 2012. The Board agreed to implement additional safety measures, such as, for example, mandating use of protective lab coats and safety equipment as standard operating procedure for dealing with hazardous materials. The Board of Regents also agreed to establish a \$500,000 environmental law scholarship in Sangji's name that will be available at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law.

At present, there are three pending criminal negligence counts facing Dr. Harran. These charges are based on allegations that he failed to train or supervise Sangii on the proper handling of chemicals, failed to train or supervise her on the need to wear appropriate clothing, and failed to implement an injury-prevention program. A six day preliminary hearing was held late last year. In April of this year, the court issued a ruling that there was sufficient evidence for the matter to proceed to a jury trial. The trial has not yet taken place.

This tragic case is believed to be the first criminal prosecution of a University professor arising from a laboratory accident. It sends a clear message to all university lab personnel, including those at UAH, that lab safety is extremely important and that safety protocols must be followed at all times.