

Lab Worker Nearly Killed While Working Alone

Two years ago a senior researcher was nearly killed at our University while he worked alone in a laboratory the evening of July 4th. His distillation flask exploded. He was working with less than 250 ml of methanol and some ether. He had done this extraction hundreds of times before. Apparently the ether was old and some peroxides had formed. The fire quickly burned itself out but it did set his shirt on fire. It was a synthetic material. (His lab coat was still on the coat rack). He suffered 3rd degree burns to his chest and arms. The worst part was that a shard of glass severed the artery in his left forearm. He lost LOTS of blood as he made his way to the elevator lobby and emergency phone. He collapsed before he reached the elevator or phone.

He was saved only by the building fire alarm which was triggered by the flash fire in the lab. It so happened the Chairman of the department was in his office catching up on some paperwork that evening. The office was down the hall. The alarm alerted the Chairman who quickly left his office and found the researcher in the hall. The Chairman used his own lab coat to extinguish the flames on the researchers shirt and then to stop the arterial bleeding. The Chair then called 911 and within 5 minutes the researcher was delivered to the local burn center.

Our University has always had a prohibition on working alone in labs but complacency had set in and it was common for individuals who "had to get their work done" to come in at any hour of the day or night to work.

Now we have a strict policy that utilizes the buddy system. You can't work after hours (or any hours) without someone else knowing where you are and what you are working on. You also have to check in with your buddy periodically.

We anticipated some resistance to this policy but in fact the researchers have accepted it quite nicely - they were afraid we were going to close the building entirely at night!

The injuries the researcher suffered cost our University in excess of \$20,000 through the workers compensation program. We were (are) extremely lucky we have not been sued.

Therefore, while there will always be pressure to keep labs open around the clock there will always be the possibility of a serious accident. Campuses need to have a rock solid policy on working in laboratories - and I don't think working alone is a defensible one.

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