
<http://www.latimes.com/features/health/la-me-uclaburn6-2009jun06,0,4566990.story>
From the Los Angeles Times

UCLA appeals state findings in fatal lab fire

Cal/OSHA had cited workplace-safety violations in the December death of staff research assistant Sheri Sangji. The school says it has made required changes and paid more than \$31,000 in fines.
By Kim Christensen

June 6, 2009

UCLA has appealed state regulators' findings of serious workplace-safety violations in the fatal burning of a staff research assistant last year in a lab fire.

The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health found last month that Sheri Sangji, 23, was not properly trained and was not wearing protective clothing Dec. 29 when an experiment with air-sensitive chemicals burst into flames.

University officials say they have made the required changes and have paid the more than \$31,000 in fines assessed by regulators.

Kevin Reed, vice chancellor for legal affairs, said the May 26 appeal will allow UCLA to stipulate that it admits no fault in connection with Cal/OSHA's findings, a move aimed at limiting the university's liability.

The appeal is necessary to make clear "that there was no citation or finding that can be used against the university in any future proceeding," Reed said in a statement.

Such proceedings might include lawsuits by labor unions or criminal action by prosecutors, Reed said in an interview. Cal/OSHA officials have said they routinely present their findings in death cases to district attorneys for review.

Workers' compensation rules may limit the family's legal options. But Sangji's sister, Naveen, said the family is pushing for an investigation by the district attorney. More than 1,300 people have signed an online petition urging one.

"We would like to see the district attorney take this up," said Naveen Sangji, a Harvard medical student who has been critical of the investigations by UCLA and Cal/OSHA. "It is time for an independent party to step up, someone who is not affiliated with UCLA."

Among other things, Cal/OSHA cited UCLA for not addressing deficiencies noted in an internal safety inspection two months before the fatal fire in professor Patrick Harran's organic chemistry laboratory, where Sheri Sangji worked, including a finding that workers were not wearing lab coats.

When the lab fire occurred, Sangji was transferring about 2 ounces of t-butyl lithium from one sealed container to another when a plastic syringe came apart in her hands, spewing a chemical compound that ignites when exposed to air.

The flash fire set ablaze her rubber gloves and synthetic sweater, causing serious burns over nearly half of her body. She died 18 days later.

Cal/OSHA's \$31,875 fine included \$18,000 for Sangji's lack of a lab coat, which might have kept her highly flammable sweater from catching fire.

Reed said in his statement that many of the corrective measures ordered by UCLA inspectors had been completed before the Dec. 29 fire but were not properly documented.

"Accordingly, the campus filed a technical appeal on these limited grounds," he said.

Although UCLA's appeal asserts that none of the safety orders cited by Cal/OSHA were violated, Reed said the legal maneuver "does not question the serious nature of the issues" the safety regulators raised.

"On the contrary," he said, "it is UCLA's goal to operate a laboratory safety program that is a model for other universities, and the campus implemented multiple and far-reaching improvements as a result of the comprehensive review ordered by the chancellor after the accident."

kim.christensen@latimes.com

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2009 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

partners:  