

## Cal/OSHA Investigates UCLA, Again

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Posted by Jyllian Kemsley on August 27, 2009 in [Chemistry in the News](#), [Education](#)

**(Post updated at end.)**

The [University of California, Los Angeles](#), is still under the microscope of state regulators. [California Division of Occupational Safety & Health \(Cal/OSHA\)](#) officials paid the school's [chemistry & biochemistry department](#) a surprise visit on Tuesday, Aug. 26.

Cal/OSHA spokesperson Erika Monterroza says that the inspection marked the opening of a new investigation into laboratory health & safety at the university, although she refused to comment on the details of the investigation while it is ongoing, including what prompted it. California law gives Cal/OSHA six months to complete investigations, although the agency usually takes 3-4 months, Monterroza says.



The UCLA Molecular Sciences Building, where Harran's labs are located.

Rita Kern, a staff research associate in UCLA's medical school, is a member of the [University Professional and Technical Employees union](#)'s health & safety committee and accompanied the three Cal/OSHA inspectors. The inspectors did not reveal what prompted their visit, she says.

The group had intended to inspect multiple labs in the chemistry & biochemistry department, Kern says, but because of time constraints looked only at the labs of [Patrick Harran](#), a UCLA chemistry professor and the supervisor of Sheharbano (Sheri) Sangji, a staff research associate who died earlier this year from burns sustained in [a fire in Harran's lab](#). Harran was not present for the inspection, Kern says.

The inspectors plan to return to look at the labs of other faculty members, Kern says.

The inspectors scrutinized general housekeeping in the labs, whether people were wearing appropriate personal protective equipment, and whether workers were informed about the hazards of the chemicals in the labs, Kern says. She says that the inspection was more educational than adversarial, with the Cal/OSHA personnel making it clear that they were there to look out for the well-being of the lab workers.

At the exit conference, the inspectors highlighted the need to ensure proper labeling of chemicals and put away items that are not in use, as well as that lab workers should be better informed about what they're working with and the hazards involved, Kern says. One of the inspectors noted that what they had seen that day was not significantly different from what they have generally observed at other universities, Kern says.

"UCLA will review Cal/OSHA's finding and, where appropriate and possible, address them immediately, consistent with UCLA's commitment to ensuring the safest possible operation of all campus labs," says UCLA spokesperson Phil Hampton.

It remains unclear what prompted the inspection. According to Cal/OSHA's [User's Guide](#) (pdf), a surprise inspection could be triggered by a formal complaint made by an employee or an employee representative such as an attorney or a union or health & safety professional. "Formal complaints are investigated by

conducting an on-site investigation within three working days for serious complaints and within 14 calendar days for nonserious complaints, unless the complaint is without reasonable basis or is intended to harass the employer. Serious complaints from state or local prosecutors are investigated within 24 hours, and imminent hazard complaints are investigated immediately,” the guide says.

Complaints can be made anonymously, Monterroza says.

**UPDATE:** Rita Kern asked me to clarify that the Cal/OSHA inspectors did say they were responding to a complaint, but they didn’t divulge the details of the complaint.

Also, Kern says that when the Cal/OSHA inspectors said that UCLA seemed to be similar to other universities in terms of laboratory health & safety, they meant it in the sense that most universities have health & safety issues that they need to address.

*Photo credit: Blair Bellamy*