

Campus lab safety committee presents recommendations to chancellor

By Phil Hampton

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On the heels of significant steps already taken by UCLA in the last six months to improve laboratory safety programs, a campus committee conducting a comprehensive review has recommended a number of additional changes that would expand outreach and training and develop a stronger culture of safety.

Chancellor Gene Block commissioned the campus-wide laboratory safety committee following the January 2009 death of staff research associate Sheharbano (Sheri) Sangji from injuries suffered in a laboratory fire. The group was charged with assessing safety programs, making recommendations for improvements and continuing to monitor and oversee lab safety as a permanent oversight body.

"This forthright assessment is a critical step in the ongoing process of making our lab safety programs a model for other universities to follow," Block said after reviewing the committee's report and recommendations. "As a lab scientist, and as a parent, I was deeply affected by the tragic death of Sheri Sangji, and I will be carefully considering the details of this report. I will settle for nothing less than the very best laboratory safety programs."

The committee's first report noted that many changes have already been made to tighten oversight. For example, the UCLA Office of Environment, Health and Safety (EH&S) now requires each laboratory to quantify chemical, biological and other hazards, specify applicable protective equipment, train all personnel in the use of protective equipment specific to the lab activities and provide written documentation to EH&S. In addition, EH&S now lists a greater number of potential hazards on inspection forms and reports, specifically notes critical violations, and, for those violations, requires corrective action and reinspection within 48 hours, substantially shortening follow-up time.

Looking forward, the group said more needs to be done, including in the area of educating the campus community. "A critical element of safety education includes developing and encouraging basic attitudes and habits of prudent behavior in the laboratory so that safety is valued as an inextricable component of all laboratory activities," the committee's report said. "To achieve this, improvements in the quality, frequency, availability, tracking and documentation of training are needed." The group said additional personnel and technical resources may be needed.

The committee also called for a stronger culture of safety developed through "a top-down management approach" that emphasizes group responsibility, from the chancellor to research administrators and from professors to faculty and staff researchers and all personnel. "In order to change the status quo, a strong sense of ownership for safety must

be fostered," the report said, recommending incentives to meet "high performance expectations."

The lab safety committee also made recommendations to increase accountability and oversight and improve laboratory design.

"The thoughtful recommendations in this very thorough report make clear precisely what is required to meet the very high expectations set by the chancellor," said Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Scott Waugh, who reports on the committee's activities to the chancellor. "Simply put, we want to be the best."

The laboratory safety committee is chaired by the vice chancellor for research and includes 18 other voting members representing key stakeholders across campus, including professors and lab directors, administrators, staff researchers, and inspectors and other regulators from EH&S.