




# LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH & SAFETY

November 11, 2005

To: Deans, Directors and Department Heads

From: Don Braswell   
Environmental Health and Safety Director

Re: Quarterly Faculty/Staff Safety Meeting

The topic of the safety meeting for this quarter is "**Lab Safety**". Attached is a recent article that appeared in the Monroe News-Star. Accidents can, will and do happen when we least expect them. Hopefully this article will help reinforce the need for safety in everything we do. Please have your faculty and staff review the attached information and sign their full signature next to their name on the attached sheet for documentation. The Office of Risk Management has stated that initialing is not sufficient; a full signature is required. Please return the sign-off sheet to Environmental Health and Safety (Campus Box 22) by November 30, 2005. The Louisiana State Office of Risk Management as well as Louisiana Tech University's Safety Plan requires quarterly Safety Meetings.

During this past year's audit, a finding was made concerning the lack of signature sheets being returned to this department. As you may know, this quarterly safety letter is a vital part of the audit process which the university goes through each year and our auditor checks these sheets to make sure that the university maintains compliance with this section of the audit and based on the past two quarters we were found to be in non-compliance because the Environmental/Safety department had not received all the sign-off sheets. By not receiving these sign-off sheets back in a timely manner could result in Louisiana Tech University failing this audit which would be tragic since the university has passed this audit since it started back in 1997 so I am asking everyone to please make sure that they are reading and signing the quarterly safety letters and then making sure that the sign-off sheet gets back to my office by the stated deadline. Thank you for your support in this effort. If you have any questions or need any additional information, please give me a call at 257-2120.

A MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA SYSTEM

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# ULM students refocused on safety after lab explosion

By Jordan Blum

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Sophia Miranda cannot help feeling the need to be extra cautious these days.

Miranda, a University of Louisiana at Monroe toxicology doctoral student, is one of many students and faculty adjusting to school in the re-opened Sugar Hall following a Sept. 25 fire that destroyed a lab and left graduate student Tripti Kulkarni in critical condition for days.

Peering through the window of the locked lab, exposed light bulbs hang in an entire lab seemingly painted with a thick coat of black paint from extensive smoke damage.

"We never expected anything like this to happen," Miranda said. "But when we enter the program, we know we'll deal with safety issues."

Although students follow proper safety procedures, she said they can sometimes become "lax" in their awareness levels.

"Some students don't always consider it a major issue, but now I think everyone should reconsider safety and make it an issue," she said.

Since the exact cause of the fire is still unknown, College of Pharmacy faculty members said it is impossible to know what lessons should be learned to prevent a similar occurrence in the future. A Monroe Fire Department investigation is still ongoing.

It is "still puzzling" because no regulations seem to have been violated and it appears to have been an isolated "freak accident," said Ronald Hill, pharmacy safety coordinator and associate professor of medicinal chemistry. It is especially bizarre since that particular lab has few flammable items in it.

Pharmacology professor Paul Sylvester said there are "inherent risks" when using flammable and radioactive compounds.

"Working in a lab is kind of like being a lifeguard, you hope you never have to jump in the water," Sylvester said. "But prevention is key. You don't want this kind of thing to ever happen."

It is the responsibility of the lab heads, in this case Girish Shah, pharmacology professor, to properly train the students. Safety meetings are held quarterly, too. But it appears there was no faulty equipment and Kulkarni did not do anything wrong. As required by the college after working hours, another graduate student and Shah were within "shouting distance" at the time of the explosion, Hill said.

David Hill, MFD chief fire investigator, said he briefly interviewed Kulkarni while she was still physically traumatized.

"She said she was pouring alcohol from one container to another," David Hill said. "There was a flash and the next thing she knew she was on fire."

She suffered first-and-second-degree burns to her upper torso and is undergoing skin grafts at the

LSU Burn Center in Shreveport. When she returns to Monroe, David Hill hopes to conduct a full interview with her and finalize the investigation.

"It's accidental, but if we can determine the ignition source maybe we can prevent it from happening again," he said.

Shah was in the building and he said he has no better idea how the fire started. The best guess of others is the fumes ignited somehow,

Ronald Hill said.

Although the fire is unprecedented with the college, other small incidents are inevitable.

Ronald Hill said one of his graduate students created a minor fire two years ago when a spark ignited flammables, but no one was injured. That was the biggest incident in the past 15 years, he said. "I've used an extinguisher three or four times in my career," he added.

In the chemistry department, the

biggest incidents are "little fires in the tip of test tubes with vapors igniting," said Neal Brotherton, department head.

"Occasionally, a student is in a hurry and gets a little burn when he grabs something hot," he said.

Years ago in graduate school, Brotherton witnessed a batch of tainted silver nitrate, explode in a plastic bottle. Fortunately the bottle was not glass but unfortunately a risk is always present with faulty

equipment and compounds.

Damage in Shah's lab is extensive because each damaged glass canister is several hundred dollars and there is about \$100,000 just in tainted chemicals, David Hill said.

ULM administrators will not comment on damage costs or potential liability issues to the university of faculty because the investigation is ongoing, said ULM spokeswoman Veronika Avery.

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