

For release
14 March 1996

Report of the Task Force Investigating the 7 March Lab Incident

The University expresses its appreciation to the members of the Task Force for their prompt investigation of the facts and for their recommendations and conclusions.

The Task Force found that the direct cause of the incident was that visiting scholar, Maosheng MA, had heated up nitric acid to clean metal deposits off a ceramic bead, a procedure that should have been done under a fume hood. The Report points out that Mr Ma had not taken safety training in the handling of dangerous chemicals since he rarely used them in his work, and that he may have come from a working environment where safety standards were less strict. The Task Force also found that Mr Xiang Bin WANG, the postgraduate student who was working independently in the laboratory and was not directly involved, had ignored requests by the supervisor of the laboratory to take a minimum of two safety courses.

In view of this violation of safety standards, the University has decided not to extend Mr Ma's contract. In addition, Mr Wang's continuation as a postgraduate student shall be conditional on his attending and completing the safety training as soon as the courses are offered.

The Task Force stated that those in the area activated the emergency ventilation system quickly, security officers arrived promptly, and the evacuation of the area went smoothly. The Report concluded, however, that chemical exposure did not reach dangerous levels and that the personnel who responded may have overreacted to the situation. Nevertheless, the University feels that it was safer to err on the side of caution, and commends the personnel for their prompt and efficient response.

All of the recommendations made by the Task Force have been accepted and will be immediately implemented.

1. Implement mechanism to ensure proper training of all laboratory users

Every Department must have an effective administrative mechanism to ensure that all experimentalists, including those who only use chemicals occasionally, receive the training needed to safely perform all operations required by their research. The University is instructing the supervisors of labs and heads of departments, to assess the level of training that each researcher needs, bearing in mind his/her previous experience, and to ensure that the required training is undertaken.

2. Implement mechanism to control the use of dangerous chemicals

The University is instructing departments to devise a mechanism that restricts the use of dangerous chemicals to those who have received proper training for handling such chemicals, and in designated areas. The departments will also be required to promote and enforce such a mechanism within their laboratories. The description of the mechanism will be filed with the Safety & Environmental Protection Office for reference and follow-up.

The Task Force Report is attached for reference purposes.

Note to Editors:

Please direct enquiries to the Office of Public Affairs at 2358 6305.