

# Chemist reaches agreement with prosecutors over lab death

Researchers express hope that UCLA case will spur safety improvements.

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Patrick Harran, the first academic chemist to face criminal charges over a lab accident in the United States, has reached a deferred-prosecution agreement with law-enforcement officials, probably avoiding a public trial and jail time.

The charges against Harran stem from the 2009 death of 23-year-old Sheharbano Sangji, known as Sheri, who died after a chemical fire in Harran's lab at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Sangji suffered third-degree burns after a chemical that she was handling with a syringe, *t*-butyl lithium, exploded into flames. The compound spontaneously ignites in air and Sangji was not wearing appropriate protective clothing.

In 2011, [the Los Angeles district attorney charged Harran](#) with three felony counts of "willful violation of an occupational safety and health standard causing the death of an employee". A fourth felony count was added in May 2013.

According to the terms of the agreement, approved today by Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge George Lomeli, Harran will pay US\$10,000 to the burns unit where Sangji was treated; develop lab-safety training tools as part of an organic-chemistry summer class that he will teach for five years to underprivileged students about to enter university; speak to incoming UCLA students about the importance of lab safety; and conduct 800 hours of non-teaching community service at a hospital.

## Court statements

If Harran violates the terms of the agreement, the case will go to trial. If he meets the terms, the charges will be dismissed after five years.

Harran did not admit guilt. In the agreement today, he "acknowledges and accepts responsibility for the conditions under which the laboratory was operated" on the day of the accident.

"No words can express the sympathy I have for Sheri's loved ones," Harran said in a statement. "What happened to Sheri in my laboratory was absolutely horrible — and she was too young, too talented and had too bright a future for anyone to accept it."

Sangji's family calls the agreement "barely a slap on the wrist" for Harran. In a statement to the court, Naveen Sangji, Sheri's sister, said that her family is "extremely disappointed that the Los Angeles District Attorney chose to settle this case rather than pursue a trial and seek justice for Sheri".

"Patrick Harran has been completely unrepentant about ordering Sheri to perform an extremely dangerous experiment without providing her with training or supervision as he is required to by law," Naveen Sangji's statement continued. "We do not understand how this man is allowed to continue running a laboratory, and supervising students and researchers."

## Mixed reaction

Some observers say that they did not expect Harran to serve jail time, but that the terms of the agreement seem lenient. "I'm disappointed, but not surprised, by the lack of consequences," says Harry Elston, principal of Midwest Chemical Safety in Dawson, Illinois, and editor of the *Journal of Chemical Health and Safety*.

"It's a lesser penalty than I had expected or thought might be appropriate," agrees Jim Kaufman, president of the Laboratory Safety Institute in Natick, Massachusetts. "But I hope this sends a message that there is a responsibility and a price to be paid for not providing the right kind of oversight."

Neal Langerman, head of Advanced Chemical Safety in San Diego, California, would have preferred the settlement to require Harran to interact with members of the research community — for instance, by requiring him to speak to other chemists about his experience.

He also says it is not clear who will oversee Harran's development of instructional materials on lab safety.

"My problem is, when we have a person who has demonstrated not really having a grasp on how a laboratory can and should be run, where is Harran going to get the knowledge to do the teaching and to demonstrate how to be an example to follow?" Langerman asks.

But other chemists say that the filing of felony charges has already been a wake-up call to researchers to become more vigilant about safety. "The signal was sent four years ago to all researchers and the repercussions have been incredibly wide," says Russ Phifer, executive director of the National Registry of Certified Chemists in West Grove, Pennsylvania. "This is a win for safety consultants and for students everywhere."

UCLA had also faced criminal charges, but these were dismissed in 2012 when the University of California Regents agreed to "acknowledge and accept responsibility for the conditions under which the laboratory was operated". The university also said it would set up a scholarship fund in Sangji's name and tighten its safety training and standards. It has paid \$70,000 in fines.

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