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NRC, WASHINGTON (D.C.) HOSPITAL TO DISCUSS APPARENT VIOLATIONS

Ten apparent violations of Nuclear Regulatory Commission requirements by a Washington, D.C., medical facility will be discussed during a meeting between agency staff and representatives of the hospital on Thursday, January 14. The apparent violations involve the handling of radioactive material, specifically the apparent loss of a nuclear pacemaker.

The predecisional enforcement conference regarding Washington Hospital Center is scheduled to begin at 1 p.m. in the Public Meeting Room at the NRC Region I office in King of Prussia, Pa. It will be open to the public for observation.

On Nov. 30, Washington Hospital Center, 110 Irving Street, N.W., reported to the NRC that a nuclear pacemaker was missing. During a follow-up review on December 2 and 3, NRC inspectors learned that the device, powered by 175 milligrams of plutonium-238, had been removed from a deceased patient at a funeral home last August and returned to the medical facility for disposal. Washington Hospital Center, in turn, shipped the pacemaker on September 15 to St. Jude Medical in Sylmar, Calif., via the U.S. Postal Service, believing St. Jude was the proper recipient of the device. (Once removed, nuclear pacemakers are supposed to be returned to the company that sold them for proper disposal.)

However, when Washington Hospital Center contacted St. Jude Medical on or about October 22 to confirm receipt of the pacemaker, it was informed the device had not arrived. Further, the hospital learned St. Jude was only supposed to receive non-nuclear pacemakers; nuclear pacemakers were to be shipped to a sister company in Colorado that has a storage facility for the devices in Florida.

Despite searches for the pacemaker at Washington Hospital Center, St. Jude Medical and postal facilities, the device has still not been located. While the nuclear material is housed in an extremely sturdy metal container, if someone

were to rupture the device they could be exposed to radioactivity that could exceed NRC allowable limits.

The apparent violations are associated with the packaging, shipping and transfer of radioactive materials.

The decision to hold a predecisional enforcement conference does not mean the NRC has determined a violation has occurred or that enforcement action will be taken. Rather, the purpose is to discuss the apparent violations, their causes and safety significance; to provide the licensee with an opportunity to point out any errors that may have been made in the NRC inspection report; and to enable the licensee to outline its proposed corrective action.

No decision on the apparent violations will be made at this conference. That decision will be made by NRC officials at a later time.

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