

United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission
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No. 95-128

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Tuesday, October 17, 1995)

NRC SENDS INCIDENT INVESTIGATION TEAM TO MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF
TECHNOLOGY TO INVESTIGATE RADIOACTIVE CONTAMINATION
OF RESEARCHER

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has dispatched an Incident Investigation Team (IIT) to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Cancer Research Center in Cambridge, Mass., to begin an immediate investigation of the radioactive contamination of a researcher.

The circumstances surrounding the incident are under review by the licensee, which reported it to the NRC staff yesterday (Oct. 16), approximately two months after the event is believed to have occurred. MIT officials told NRC staff they had not reported the incident earlier because their analyses suggest the researcher received less than the reportable dose limit of 600 microcuries.

According to the licensee, the male researcher discovered he was contaminated during a routine survey of his work area on August 19. The licensee subsequently detected Phosphorous-32 contamination on an item of clothing the researcher said he had worn August 14, when he had last handled P-32 in the laboratory.

On the basis of six weeks of urinalyses, MIT informed the researcher last week that he may have ingested what was described as a drop of P-32 containing 579 microcuries. The researcher has told MIT campus police he believes the contamination was not accidental. Campus police are investigating his allegation. Furthermore, at his request, an independent consultant will prepare a second dose estimate because he questions MIT's estimate.

MIT secured all radioactive materials in the cancer research lab immediately following discovery of the contamination event, but has permitted work with radioactive material to resume after requiring more stringent inventory and accountability in the lab and tightening security.

As part of its investigation, NRC will prepare an incident chronology; identify the source of the P-32; project actual and potential dose consequences; evaluate the licensee's event reporting and response to the incident; investigate potential wrongdoing at the laboratory and

determine whether the NRC's regulatory procedures and activities preceding the event may have contributed to it.

The NRC sent a letter to David J. Litster, MIT's Vice-President and Dean for Research, which requires that no later than October 24 certain steps be taken, ensuring among other things that security over radioisotopes is adequate to provide reasonable assurance against another such incident.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been informed of this event and has asked to observe the NRC investigation. The request will be honored.
