NRC NEWS

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"The Essential Role of the Safety Regulator"
Prepared Remarks for
The Honorable Gregory B. Jaczko
Chairman
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
at the
54th IAEA General Conference
Scientific Forum
Vienna, Austria
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Thank you for the introduction. I would like to begin by acknowledging International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Amano for his leadership in convening the Scientific Forum on Cancer in Developing Countries. The issues that we have been discussing over the last two days are tremendously important – as we all know, millions of people around the world are affected by cancer, and other medical issues, every year.

As a regulator, I have a particular focus on the goal of ensuring the safety of patients, medical workers, and the public – everyone who may receive treatment, work with, or be exposed to radiation and radioactive materials in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. Of course, this is just one aspect of a nuclear regulator's broad mission, which includes licensing, oversight, and enforcement activities over a wide variety of entities that use materials for many different commercial, industrial, and medical purposes. Each type of facility and use will present different challenges to the regulator in meeting its safety and security mission. This makes it essential for regulators to have the authority, staff, technical expertise, and financial resources to meet all aspects of their responsibilities.

As we have heard today, and throughout the Forum, technological advances continue to increase the potential benefits of radiation medicine around the world. Ongoing efforts by national governments, the World Health Organization, and the IAEA are seeking to take advantage of those potential benefits by expanding the infrastructure for radiation medicine. The United States government is also doing its part to contribute to these efforts. Through the Peaceful Uses Initiative that U.S. Secretary of State Clinton announced earlier this year, the United States is supporting the IAEA's Program of Action on Cancer Therapy and other efforts to develop peaceful uses of nuclear technology.

In moving forward with these efforts, it is important that nations consider the risks as well as the benefits of radiation medicine, and put measures in place to properly focus attention on these issues. The development of strong national regulatory bodies is an essential step in this process that will enable countries to develop the requirements for the safe and secure use of radiation in medicine and monitor compliance with these requirements.

In order for a regulator to meet its safety and security mission in this complex scientific area, it has to have the internal expertise – the technical staff – to develop sound rules and oversight programs. A safety regulator also must keep open a dialogue with external stakeholders, including patient advocates and health care professionals. A continuing communication between the developers of new technologies, the manufacturers of equipment, the users of the equipment, and the regulatory authority is essential to achieving radiation safety. Toward that end, the NRC maintains a committee of medical experts and patient advocates to obtain their thoughts and insights about the medical uses of radioactive materials. That is the type of open, transparent, and inclusive approach that leads to stronger, more effective regulation.

We all know that there continue to be unfortunate events in which radiation sources are not properly controlled and cause significant exposures to individuals in the public. In response to incidents such as these, the NRC works to enhance its oversight and enforcement activities in this area. It should be a reminder that everyone involved in the delivery of health care needs to focus on their primary responsibility for the well-being of their patients and delivering treatment without unnecessarily exposing others. Medical workers must have the necessary skills and training to handle radioactive material appropriately and administer correct doses, thereby protecting themselves and their patients. The potential growth of radiation medicine makes it even more critical that we each fulfill our respective role in ensuring radiation safety.

As Director General Amano said in his opening remarks of the General Conference on Monday, “it is important that countries’ safety and security infrastructures keep pace with developments,” in this case in nuclear medicine. The NRC is committed to working with other national regulators and international bodies to share our regulatory experience with countries as they develop their radiation medicine programs. In my bilateral meetings this week, I have urged my counterparts to do the same.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate on this panel. I look forward to the rest of the presentations and the discussion to follow.