Plea Deal in UCLA Lab Death

A University of California Los Angeles chemistry professor will pay a $10,000 fine, serve 800 hours of community service and teach a chemistry course to inner-students as part of a settlement in a 2008 case in which one of his assistants died from burns suffered in a laboratory accident.

Prof. Patrick Harran, 44, had been charged with four felony counts of violating the state Labor Code in the Dec. 29, 2008, death of Sheharbano Sangji, 23. The graduate assistant suffered second- and third-degree burns over 40% of her body while attempting to transfer a couple of ounces of tertiary butyl lithium.

The chemical ignites upon contact with oxygen and during the transfer, Sangji splashed a small amount on herself. She was not wearing protective clothing and she caught fire. Sangji died about two weeks later in a burn unit.

The case has been somewhat of a cause celebre with labor activists, who pressured the L.A. County District Attorney to prosecute Harran.

Harran was charged with willfully violating General Industry Safety Orders §§ 5191(f)(4), 3203(a) and 3383(b) for failing to train workers on the presence or release of hazardous chemicals and occupational exposure to them, and failing to use protective clothing or a lab coat while working with a pyrophoric substance (one that ignites spontaneously in the air).

The D.A.’s office says that Harran acknowledged that he was “ultimately responsible for the safety of personnel in my laboratory.” In addition to the fine, he will teach an organic chemistry course to inner city high school graduates to help prepare them for college-level chemistry. He will teach the course for seven weeks each summer for five years.

Harran also will complete 800 hours of non-teaching community service at UCLA Hospital or UCLA Health Services. The felony charges will remain pending for five years while the professor completes the terms of the settlement.

Harran’s attorney, Thomas O’Brien, stated, “Professor Harran remains deeply saddened by this tragic accident.” The agreement “will allow Professor Harran to continue focusing on his ground-breaking research while increasing lab safety at UCLA.”