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Radioactive elements in labs unlikely to endanger students

By Greg Traweek
Of the Emerald

The recent nuclear accident at the Chernobyl plant in the Soviet Union has led Americans to question the safety of other areas where radiation is present.

Radioactive materials are used in experiments conducted in several campus laboratories, but Bill James, a health physicist from the campus Environmental Health and Safety office, said students and faculty have nothing to worry about.

The materials used in graduate-level biochemical and physics labs are "generally low level, low hazard as far health considerations are concerned," James said.

"The majority of materials here are low emitters that can usually be contained or blocked by glass," he said. "Their actual danger is small."

Small quantities of more potent materials such as americium and plutonium are used in the physics labs, James said, "but not enough for any explosions."

The office is licensed to handle radioactive materials for research by the state Health Division, James said. Health Division guidelines specify the amounts of radioactive materials that can be used and the forms they must be used in, such as liquid or solid, he said.

"If we want to continue to do research with such materials we must abide by their guidelines," he said.

Radioactive materials are used in genetic and nuclear physics studies, James said.

The materials would pose the greatest danger if someone spilled them in a high-traffic area such as an elevator or hallway, James said. If it goes undetected, radiation can leak through walls and other structures, he said.

But the office takes precautions to prevent mishaps. Surveys are conducted monthly in public areas around the science departments and in labs to detect radiation levels, James said. If high levels are located, it is the office's duty to clean it up.

"We are the immediate response team in case of any accidents," James said.

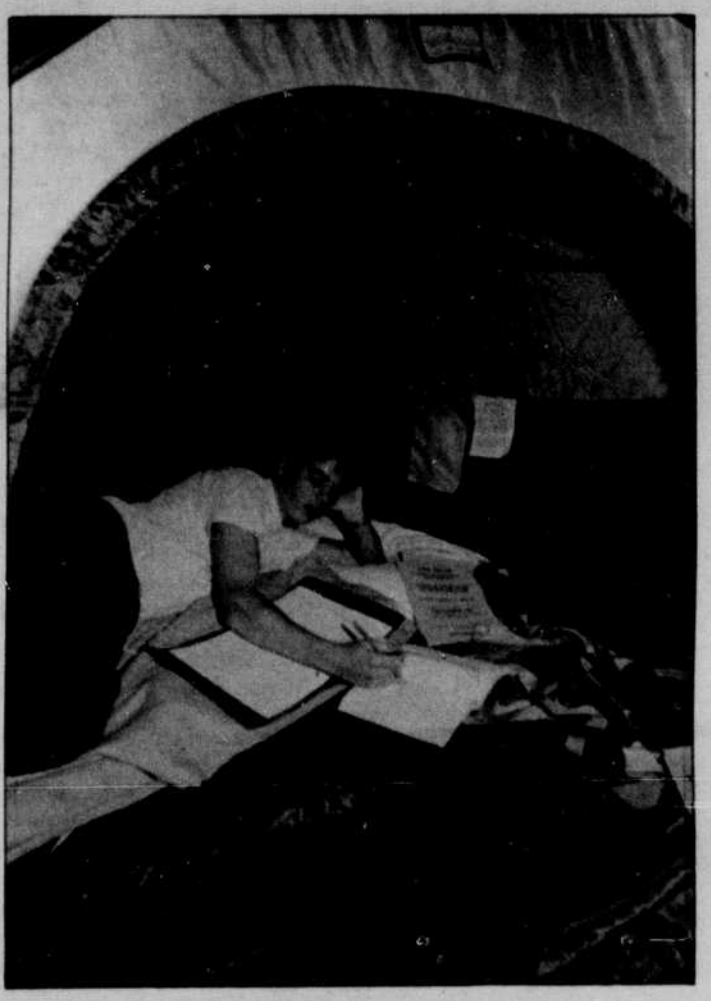
For those working with the materials, the greatest danger lies in ingestion, he said. Students work behind glass when handling low-emission elements, said Karen Sprague, a lab instructor and an associate biology professor.

"Most materials in our biology labs emit beta particles, and glass will stop them," she said. "With larger amounts we work behind lead," she said.

Students are tested for radiation exposure with a meter at intervals that depend on their usage level, she said, and students working with high-emission materials also must periodically submit urine samples.

The tests are precautions, James said. "The purpose is to catch anything before it gets to be a bad case," he said. If excessive radiation is found, the cause of the situation is investigated, and the student is notified. Levels high enough to cause concern have been found, but not high enough to pose health risks, he said.

Two other precautions that prevent accidents are security and the cost of the materials, he said. All labs are locked when not in use to prevent someone who is unauthorized to handle the materials from creating a problem, he said. This also keeps costs down, James said. "These materials are expensive. There is a lot of motivation not to blow it with them."



Campus camping

Mike Ostrom, a freshman journalism major, prepares to spend the night outside the University Housing office in hopes of getting a room in Carson dormitory next year. The office begins taking room reservations today on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Photo by Michael Wilhelm

Delegation hopes to improve U.S.-Soviet relations

By Lisa Loving
Of the Emerald

A Eugene licensed journey electrician and a horticulturist are among 30 Northwest women traveling to the Soviet Union this summer to "meet Soviet women at work."

The Second Women's Journey for Peace hopes to open more positive channels for dialogue between the two nations by promoting solidarity between working women. It is sponsored by the Earthstewards Network, a Seattle-based political action organization.

The group will visit factories and farms throughout the Soviet Union to share women's experiences in managing families and professional lives.

"We need to take the initiative to build citizen diplomacy," said Joyce Naffziger, publicity manager for the delegates. "We realize that our governments are not doing it."

While tradeswomen and those with agriculture backgrounds are particularly valued as tour members, the program is open to all women, Naffziger said. The women will leave Seattle June 19 and return via Los Angeles July 6.

Once in the Soviet Union, delegates will distribute buttons made by Eugene residents as tokens of friendship that display the maker's name and address on the back, enabling the Soviets to make contact if they choose. A booth at the Saturday Market is featuring the buttons, which can be designed by anyone interested.

Photo by Shu-Shing Chen

Kathryn Dubiel (left) and Kate Gessert received scholarships to travel to the Soviet Union this summer on a peace mission.

Several women from Eugene will participate. Horticulturalist Kate Gessert and tradeswoman Kathryn Dubiel received scholarships for the trip from Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND) because of their professional backgrounds.

Dubiel is an electrician working as a union steward at the Eugene Wastewater Treatment Plant. She is also a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

'The bottom line is that we are all humans sharing this planet.'
— Janet Anderson

Community activist Janet Anderson, a participant in last year's journey, will help lead the tour. An athletic trainer and sports medicine specialist at Lane Community College, Anderson helped found the Eugene WAND chapter.

The group will spend several days in Moscow before traveling to the Kazakhstan Republic in central Asia, followed by visits to Odessa, Leningrad and Novgorod.

"There may be some changes in the itinerary because some of the places we were going to visit are near Chernobyl," Gessert said. Potential precautions against nuclear exposure center on avoiding cities near rivers that could be contaminated, Naffziger said.

Part of the reason hostility exists between the United States and the Soviet Union lies in the lack of interaction between the countries' citizens, Gessert said.

"They also are very afraid of each other," Gessert said, "and with more contact there will be less fear."

For Gessert, that leads to the long-term goals of the project. She said people of the United States and the Soviet Union all want to end the possibility of nuclear war. "We're all on the same side," she said.

By setting up regular frameworks for citizen exchange, the nations' fears can be alleviated in favor of a relationship of trust, Gessert said.

Anderson, in a written statement, said, "Many Americans felt grief for the victims of the Chernobyl accident, but this administration's response was framed only in distrust of the Russians, and the incident was used to widen the gap between our two countries.

"One of our goals is to promote heart-to-heart connections between Soviet and American people," Anderson added. "The bottom line is that we are all humans sharing this planet."