

Suspect letter still a mystery

■ Attention shifts from the powdery substance within the letter to its mysterious sender

By Marty Toohey
for the Emerald

More than one week after a letter containing a white powdery substance was mailed to the University, it is still unknown as to why a physics professor was targeted.

The letter Bernd Crasemann received Nov. 18, postmarked from Malaysia and containing a harmless powdery substance and a few phrases in English such as "death to the oppressors," has left everyone in the physics department scratching their heads.

Crasemann, an emeritus professor of physics, earned his master's degree in physics from the University of California at Berkeley. He came to Eugene in 1953 and immediately took a teaching position at the University.

Coworkers and contemporaries describe the 77-year-old as friendly and helpful. He is active in scientific circles, is chairman of the Northwest section of the American Physical Society and edits the science journal Physical Review A. His specialty is the study of inner-shell atomic physics, a branch of subatomic physics.

Dietrich Belitz, head of the physics department at the University of Oregon, said Crasemann is one of the nicest people he's ever met.

"It's inconceivable to me that anyone would wish to cause him harm," Belitz said.

John Drumheller, who will take over as APS Northwest section chairman when Crasemann steps down next year, said he doesn't "have any idea why someone would have cause to threaten Bernd."

Crasemann himself said he has no idea why he received such a letter. He said it was most likely a random mailing, because his name appears only on the envelope in which the letter was sent and not on the letter itself.

He thought it extremely unlikely that the letter was sent by an upset student, because he has not taught classes in nearly 10 years and would not suspect his students. And although he turns down nearly 1,200 submissions per year worldwide as the editor of Physical Review A, he said he has never received a letter even expressing discontent and would not expect one from the people in the scientific community.

"I would hope that people do not speculate too much or make something out of this that it's not," Crasemann said. "I think it's just a random thing."

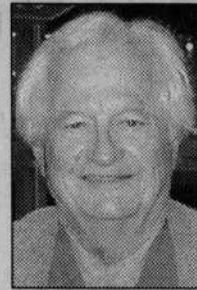
As Crasemann's case is ongoing, the FBI would not comment on whether the white powdery substance he received was the same as the substance in the Microsoft letter. However, in both cases, the FBI later determined the substance was harmless.

Belitz said he has never heard of an angry letter being sent in response to a submission rejection, but that with the emotions involved in these rejections, such a reaction is not impossible.

"If you edit a journal, of course you're going to have people upset at you," Belitz said. "Sometimes you have to deal with controversial issues, and you have to turn people down who want to have their part heard."

"Quite frankly, we're just hoping this is just a really bad joke," Belitz said.

Marty Toohey is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.



CRASEMANN

Study looks at hospital-related deaths

■ One University professor will examine the impact on hospitals of providing public 'report cards' of their care

By Marty Toohey
for the Emerald

Nearly 100,000 people die annually from medical errors, according to the American Medical Association, and University Professor Judy Hibbard is determining whether public scrutiny will help hospitals improve that figure.

Hibbard, who teaches in the department of planning, public policy and management, is studying the impact of a hospital "report card" on the Madison, Wis., area, thanks to a \$530,000 grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Over the next three years, she and fellow PPM Professor Jean Stockard will study whether making the report card public will compel the hospitals to provide better care.

Hibbard's study comes on the heels of the California Legislature's recent approval of a study of fatalities from coronary procedures to determine if doctors were at fault.

"These types of public reports are coming all over the country," Hibbard said. "It's cardiac care in California and hospitals in Wisconsin right now, but soon most of the blanks will be filled in and these public reports will be the norm. This is at the very heart and soul of (health care) policy approaches taking place right now."

The report card studied the performance of 121 Madison-area hospitals in five categories and compared the results with national averages, adjusted for the general health of the Madison population. The performances of 24 hospitals have been made public, while the rest will be kept private, and three years from now Hibbard will determine whether the hospitals whose information was made public

made greater improvements in their care.

The report card was compiled by The Alliance, a nonprofit health cooperative in Madison. The Alliance originally intended the report to include only the 24 hospitals contracted with it.

The relatively inexpensive evaluation process allowed the health cooperative to include the other 97 hospitals, however, according to The Alliance administrator Cheryl Demars. The 24 hospitals contracted with The Alliance were the ones whose information was publicly released.

"This was mainly intended to help Alliance consumers make more informed decisions," Demars said. "Although we decided it was important to study the impact of the report, it wasn't intended as a survey of all Wisconsin hospitals."

Demars said she anticipates that the hospitals whose informa-

tion was disclosed will make greater improvements in their care.

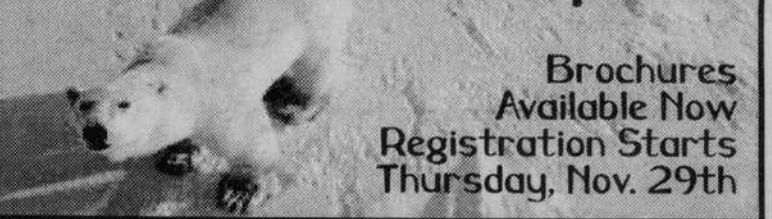
"Our experience when dealing with public hospitals is that public pressure makes a difference," she said. "The hospitals, for the most part, accept that the time for public scrutiny has come."

Demars said when she was looking for someone to study public impact of reports, there was "not much literature available, but what little we found has been done by (Hibbard). She's clearly the leading expert in the field."

Hibbard has done several studies of health plans, but said they did not involve as much hard data as the Madison report. She said most health care providers improve after such a report is released publicly.

Marty Toohey is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.

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