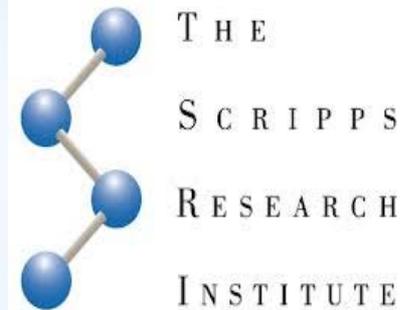




# UCLA researcher's death draws scrutiny to lab safety

Jim Gohres



*The Scripps Research Institute*

# UCLA Incident

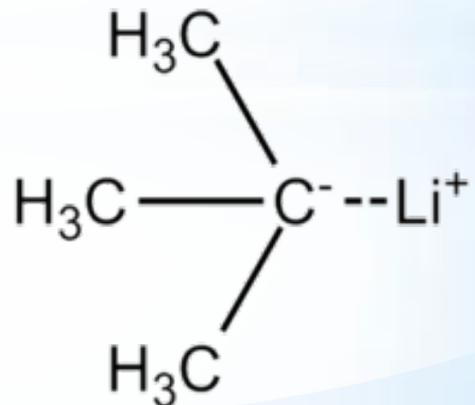
**On Dec. 29, 2008, Sheharbano "Sheri" Sangji, 23, was severely burned over nearly half of her body when air-sensitive chemicals burst into flames during an experiment and ignited her clothing.**



# UCLA Incident

The syringe contained a solution that combusts upon contact with air. She accidentally pulled the plunger out of a syringe while conducting an experiment.

The solution was *tert*-Butyllithium and pentane. *tert*-Butyllithium is a pyrophoric substance.



The solution spilled onto Sheri's hands and torso. Her polyester sweater burst into flames. The fire investigator said the polyester sweater acted like "solid gasoline". She wasn't wearing a lab coat; no one had told her she had to.

At the direction of her boss, chemistry professor Patrick Harran, Sheri had been trying to produce a chemical that held promise as an appetite suppressant. She was unsupervised.

A postdoctoral fellow from China, working nearby, tried to smother the fire with his own lab coat but didn't think to put Sheri under an emergency shower a few feet away. By this point, deep burns covered almost half of her body. She died 18 days later.

# UCLA Incident

It was totally preventable," said Neal Langerman, a San Diego consultant and former head of the American Chemical Society's Division of Chemical Health and Safety, whose members were given a detailed account of the incident by a University of California safety official. "Poor training, poor technique, lack of supervision and improper method. This was just not the right way to transfer these things."



# UCLA Incident

**Two months earlier, UCLA safety inspectors found more than a dozen deficiencies in the same lab. Among the findings: Employees were not wearing requisite protective lab coats, and flammable liquids and volatile chemicals were stored improperly.**

# UCLA Incident

December 2009, California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health, Cal/OSHA, already had begun an inquiry into the accident at UCLA. That May the university was cited for four violations; it paid a \$31,875 fine.

# UCLA Incident

In December 2009, Cal/OSHA's Bureau of Investigations, which looks into all worker fatalities in the state, recommended that Patrick Harran and UCLA be charged with involuntary manslaughter and felony labor code violations. "Dr. Harran," investigator Brian Baudendistel concluded in a 95-page report, "permitted Victim Sangji to work in a manner that knowingly caused her to be exposed to a serious and foreseeable risk of serious injury or death."

**DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS**  
**DIVISION OF OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH**  
**BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIONS**  
320 WEST FOURTH STREET, SUITE 400  
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December 23, 2009

Case Number:      S1110-003-09

**Investigation Report**

**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES**

**Brian Baudendistel, Senior Special Investigator**

**TYPE AND CHARGES:** Industrial Fatality

**CALIFORNIA PENAL CODE VIOLATION:**

**Section 192-** Involuntary Manslaughter

**CALIFORNIA LABOR CODE VIOLATION:**

**Section 6425(a)-** Willful violation resulting in death or permanent or prolonged impairment.

**CALIFORNIA CODE OF REGULATIONS, TITLE 8:**

**Section 3203(b)(2)-** Failure to maintain written training records relative to occupational exposure to hazardous chemical in laboratories (Cited as a Regulatory violation, Citation 1, Item 1).

**Section 3203(a)(6)-** Failure to establish, implant and maintain an effective Injury and Illness Prevention program; failure to correct unsafe workplace conditions in a timely manner (Cited as a Serious violation, Citation 2, Item 1).

**Section 5191(f)(4)-** Failure to provide chemical safety training to employees (Cited as a Serious violation, Citation 3, Item 1).

**Section 3383(b)-** Failure to require clothing appropriate for the work to be worn (Cited as a Serious Accident-Related violation, Citation 4, Item 1).

# UCLA Incident

Following inspections in August 2009 and February 2010 Cal/OSHA cited UCLA for 16 lab safety violations, five classified as “serious” and one as “repeat serious.” The university paid a \$36,690 fine.

# UCLA Incident

Two years later on Dec. 27, 2011, the Los Angeles County DA filed a felony complaint against Harran and the UC regents. The allegation: “willful violation of an occupational safety and health standard causing the death of an employee.”

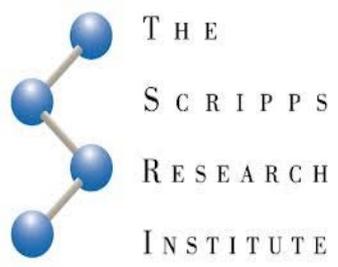
Chemists in academia and private industry already had been discussing the case. The filing of the complaint took the discussion to another level.

This sent shock waves throughout the academic community.

# UCLA Incident

“Each lab is like an island where the PI is king,” says one postdoctoral researcher in chemistry at Caltech “He provides for the lab, brings in grants, decides how the money is spent. There are a lot of demands on their time, and the safety stuff a lot of times gets lost in the shuffle. I’ve never heard of anyone getting fired for being unsafe.”

“At some academic institutions, PIs may view laboratory inspections by an outside entity as infringing upon their *academic freedom*.”



# UCLA Incident

*UC regents strike plea deal in UCLA chemistry lab death.*

Charges against the university were dropped in July 2012, when the regents agreed to follow comprehensive safety measures and endow a \$500,000 scholarship in Sangji's name. The charges against Harran are thought to be the first stemming from an academic lab accident in the United States. He faces up to 4 1/2 years in prison if convicted.

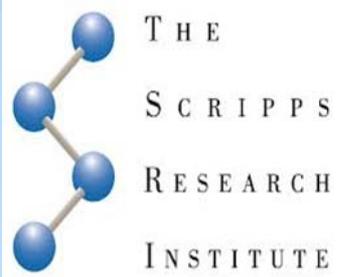
# UCLA Incident

*Trial decision delayed in UCLA lab death case*

A Los Angeles judge has delayed until mid-February her decision on whether UCLA chemistry professor Patrick Harran must stand trial on charges stemming from the December 2008 lab fire that killed staff research assistant Sheri Sangji.

# UCLA Incident

Patrick Harran's preliminary hearing in the Sheri Sangji case was continued to April 26, not March 21 as the district attorney's office originally thought.



# UCLA Incident

<http://cls.ucla.edu/>