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<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/mar/01/local/me-uclaburn1>

Deadly UCLA lab fire leaves haunting questions

Problems at UCLA went unfixed for two months before a young researcher was burned in a chemical accident.

March 01, 2009 Kim Christensen

UCLA's Molecular Sciences Building was mostly closed for the holidays on Dec. 29 as research assistant Sheri Sangji worked on an organic chemistry experiment.

Only three months into her job in the lab, the 23-year-old Pomona College graduate was using a plastic syringe to extract from a sealed container a small quantity of t-butyl lithium -- a chemical compound that ignites instantly when exposed to air.

As she withdrew the liquid, the syringe came apart in her hands, spewing flaming chemicals, according to a UCLA accident report. A flash fire set her clothing ablaze and spread second- and third-degree burns over 43% of her body.

Eighteen excruciating days later, Sangji died in a hospital burn unit.

"It is horrifying," said her sister Naveen, 26, a Harvard medical student. "Sheri wasn't out doing something stupid. She was working in a lab at one of the largest universities in the world. She gets these horrific injuries and loses her life to these injuries and we still don't know how it happened or why it wasn't prevented."

Sangji's death was more than a tragic workplace accident. It also raised serious questions about the university's attention to laboratory safety.

"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," Langerman said. "She died, didn't she? It speaks for itself."

Two months earlier, UCLA safety inspectors found more than a dozen deficiencies in the same lab, Molecular Sciences Room 4221, according to internal investigative and inspection reports reviewed by The Times. Among the findings: Employees were not wearing requisite protective lab coats, and flammable liquids and volatile chemicals were stored improperly.

Chemical Safety Officer Michael Wheatley sent the inspection report to the researcher who oversees the lab, professor Patrick Harran, as well as to the head of the Chemistry and Biochemistry Department and a top UCLA safety official. The report directed that problems be fixed by Dec. 5.

But the required corrective action was not taken, records show, and on Dec. 29 all that stood between Sangji's torso and the fire that engulfed her was a highly flammable, synthetic sweater that fueled the flames.

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Under scrutiny

The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health is investigating, as are the Office of the State Fire Marshal, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board. A spokeswoman for Cal/OSHA, the lead agency, said she could not comment on the investigation.

UCLA officials say they are cooperating with all of the agencies.

"We consider this a profoundly tragic accident, and the campus community is still reeling from the loss of Sheri as a member of the Bruin family," said Kevin Reed, vice chancellor for legal affairs.

Harran, the organic chemistry professor for whom Sangji worked, said he could not comment on the accident because of the pending investigations. But he said he's heartbroken.

"Words cannot convey my grief or that of those who work in my lab, and our pain cannot possibly compare with the immeasurable anguish felt by Sheri's family," he wrote in an e-mail. "Sheri's death is a tragedy that has left her friends, colleagues and co-workers here in our department devastated."

UCLA has launched a comprehensive review of lab safety protocols and has stepped up inspections and shortened the time allowed to correct serious violations. Chancellor Gene Block also established a campuswide lab safety committee and ordered enhanced accountability measures.

Such efforts are of little comfort to Sangji's family. Her parents, Shaukat Sangji, a small-business owner who lives in Toronto, Canada, with his wife, Maimoona, a Montessori schoolteacher, were too distraught to be interviewed, said Naveen, who relayed an e-mail message to The Times from her father.

"They say time will heal, but I know for sure nothing can heal this," he said. "This has completely destroyed our lives forever."

Born and raised in Pakistan, Sheharbano "Sheri" Sangji followed her older sister to Pomona College, a small, top-tier liberal arts school in Claremont, in 2003. Their parents and younger brother moved to Canada.

"Sheri always loved science and fell in love with chemistry," Naveen said, but she also was interested in the rights of women and immigrants, environmental policy and law. She decided to become an attorney, with an eye toward a career that would blend her interests.

"She was brilliant, just so impressive," her sister said.

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<http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-ucla-legal-20141016-story.html>

UCLA's legal fees in fatal lab fire case neared \$4.5 million



UCLA chemistry professor Patrick Harran, right, sits with his attorney Thomas O'Brien in L.A. Superior Court in June, when he struck a deal with prosecutors that essentially freed him from criminal liability in the death of a staff researcher. (Al Seib)



Kim Christensen **Contact Reporter**

Records reveal UCLA paid nearly \$4.5 million to fight charges against a chemistry professor in lab fire case

October 16, 2014

After [UCLA](#) chemistry professor Patrick Harran walked out of court in June, his lawyers issued a news release hailing the "first-of-its-kind" deal that all but freed him from criminal liability in a 2008 lab fire that killed a staff researcher.

The "deferred prosecution agreement" that allowed Harran to avoid pleading guilty or no-contest to any charge might have been a novel resolution, as his attorneys said.

But it certainly didn't come cheap.

Top-tier law firms hired to defend him and the University of California against felony charges in the death of Sheharbano "Sheri" Sangji charged more than 7,700 billable hours and nearly \$4.5 million in fees, according to documents obtained by The Times through a [California Public Records Act](#) request.

Nearly five dozen defense attorneys, paralegals and others billed for work on the case, the records show. One attorney charged \$792,000 in fees and at least four other lawyers billed more than \$500,000 each — all for pretrial work.

We defended ourselves and our faculty member as was our right and obligation, using funds in a systemwide self-insurance program.— UCLA, in a statement

The University of California paid the fees out of its publicly funded pocket. UCLA said in a statement Wednesday that the expense was justified.

"We defended ourselves and our faculty member as was our right and obligation, using funds in a systemwide self-insurance program," it said.

Sangji, 23, was not wearing a protective lab coat in Harran's laboratory on Dec. 29, 2008, when a plastic syringe she was using to transfer t-butyl lithium from one sealed container to another came apart, spewing a chemical compound that ignites when exposed to air. She suffered extensive burns and died 18 days later.



Sheharbano "Sheri" Sangji was a 23-year-old staff researcher in UCLA professor Patrick Harran's chemistry lab when she suffered severe chemical burns in December 2008 and later died. (Al Seib)

In late 2011, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office charged Harran with three felony counts of willfully violating state occupational health and safety standards in what was thought to be the first criminal case involving an academic lab accident. Harran, ultimately charged with four felonies, was accused of failing to provide proper safety training and failing to require protective gear for lab workers.

Harran and UCLA contended that Sangji, who earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry five months before going to work in Harran's lab in October 2008, was a seasoned chemist who chose not to wear protective gear and was trained in the experiment she was performing.

UCLA, in its statement, said "this accident was a terrible tragedy, not a crime" and called the criminal charges "an unfortunate distraction" from its efforts to improve lab safety in the aftermath of Sangji's death.

Harran, 45, was a rising star when he joined the faculty in July 2008 as the first Donald J. Cram Chair in Organic Chemistry. For him, the criminal case had huge personal stakes and career implications: If convicted, he faced up to 4 1/2 years in prison and the loss of state and federal grant money for his research.

The University of California hired premier Los Angeles law firms to represent Harran and its Board of Regents, which faced identical charges.

Thomas O'Brien, a former U.S. attorney in Los Angeles, led a team from Paul Hastings on behalf of Harran. Craig Moyer of Manatt, Phelps and Phillips represented the regents. A third firm, Munger, Tolles and Olson, worked on the case to a lesser extent.

The Paul Hastings firm collected about \$3.1 million in fees for defending Harran, records show. O'Brien, a partner, billed about \$526,000, at hourly rates of up to \$750. Three associate members of the firm billed more than \$500,000 each, including one who charged about \$792,000 at hourly rates of up to \$630.

Charges against UC were dropped in July 2012 when the regents agreed to follow comprehensive safety measures and endow a \$500,000 scholarship in Sangji's name. UCLA said it has since spent \$20 million on enhancing lab safety.

For its efforts, Moyer's firm reaped nearly \$1.3 million in fees, records show. His billings totaled more than \$616,000, at hourly rates ranging from \$582 to \$620.

The case against Harran continued for nearly two years after the regents' charges were dropped, as he dug in against accepting any plea bargain that carried a criminal conviction. His lawyers launched a barrage of motions and other legal attacks on the prosecution's case, including a petition to the California Court of Appeal.

Finally, on June 20, Harran struck a deal with prosecutors. He admitted no wrongdoing, but agreed to develop and teach an organic chemistry course for inner-city students for five summers, perform 800

hours of community service in the UCLA Hospital system, and pay \$10,000 to the Grossman Burn Center.

If he fulfills his obligations under the agreement, the charges will be dismissed after five years.

Harran declined to comment. In a statement, his lawyers said he "has met and will continue to meet" the requirements.

Neither UCLA nor the law firm directly addressed the issue of fees in their statements to The Times.

"As soon as this tragic accident occurred, the Regents made clear that they would stand behind Professor Harran and provide for his defense," the Paul Hastings firm said. "For nearly five years, we have worked in close coordination with the Regents and their counsel to defend this complicated and high-stakes case."

Sangji's sister, Naveen, has called the sanctions against Harran and UCLA "barely a slap on the wrist." She noted that previous safety violations in his lab were not corrected before her sister's death and that UCLA had ignored the "wake-up calls" of earlier accidents in other labs.

On Wednesday, she decried the nearly \$4.5 million in legal fees — enough to buy 86,000 lab coats.

"Had UCLA spent even a tiny fraction of this money and effort on laboratory and chemical safety training and fire resistant gear ... Sheri might still be with us today," she said.

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UPDATE

11:40 a.m.: This story has been updated to include that UCLA has since spent \$20 million on enhancing lab safety.

This story was originally posted at 5 a.m.

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<http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-ucla-lab-fire-plea-20140621-story.html>

UCLA professor strikes deal in lab fire case, avoids prison



UCLA chemistry professor Patrick Harran, right, sits with his attorney, Thomas O'Brien, after he struck a deal with prosecutors that all but frees him from criminal liability in a 2008 laboratory fire that killed a staff research assistant. (Al Seib, Los Angeles Times)



Kim Christensen Contact Reporter

UCLA professor all but freed from criminal liability in 2008 laboratory fire that killed one

June 20, 2014

[UCLA](#) chemistry professor Patrick Harran struck a deal with prosecutors Friday that all but frees him from criminal liability in the 2008 laboratory fire that killed a staff research assistant.

Charged with four felony counts of willfully violating state occupational health and safety standards in the death of Sheharbano "Sheri" Sangji, Harran had faced up to 4 1/2 years in prison if convicted.

Instead, under a "deferred prosecution agreement" approved by Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge George Lomeli, Harran admitted no wrongdoing, but will develop and teach an organic chemistry course for college-bound inner-city students for five summers, perform 800 hours of non-teaching community service in the UCLA Hospital system, and pay \$10,000 to the Grossman Burn Center in lieu of restitution to Sangji's family.

The resolution caps a long-running legal battle that pitted Harran and UCLA against Sangji's family and the Los Angeles County district attorney's office. It did not sit well with Sangji's relatives, who had pushed for a trial and were "extremely disappointed" that prosecutors chose to settle.

"This settlement, like the previous one with UCLA, is barely a slap on the wrist for the responsible individual," the family said in a statement Friday.

Three felony counts against the University of California were dropped in July 2012 when the Board of Regents agreed to follow comprehensive safety measures and endow a \$500,000 scholarship in Sangji's name.

This settlement, like the previous one with UCLA, is barely a slap on the wrist for the responsible individual.— Sheharbano "Sheri" Sangji's family

Harran left the courtroom immediately after the hearing and did not comment after the judge approved the agreement. His attorney, Thomas O'Brien, said "our focus today should be on the Sangji family and their terrible loss" and that Harran was "dedicated to ensuring that such tragic accidents never occur again."

Sangji, 23, was not wearing a protective lab coat on Dec. 29, 2008, when a plastic syringe she was using to transfer t-butyl lithium from one sealed container to another came apart, spewing a chemical compound that ignites when exposed to air. She suffered extensive burns and died 18 days later.



Sheri Sangji, 23, was working in a UCLA laboratory in December 2008 when she was fatally burned in a fire. (Abbas Nanji)

Harran and UCLA contend that Sangji — who had earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry five months before going to work in the professor's lab in October 2008 — was a seasoned chemist who chose not to

wear protective gear and had been trained in the experiment she was performing.

In what was thought to be the first criminal case arising from an academic lab accident, Harran, 44, was accused of failing to provide proper hazardous-chemical safety training, failing to require body protection

for employees exposed to hazardous substances and failing to have an effective illness- and injury-prevention program.

If he fulfills his obligations under the agreement, the charges will be dismissed after five years.

Born and raised in Pakistan, Sangji had followed her older sister to Pomona College — a small, top-tier liberal arts school in Claremont. Their parents and younger brother settled in Canada.

In court Friday, Sangji's siblings excoriated Harran as someone who cared more about his ambitions than their sister, and who blamed the victim for her own death while deflecting responsibility.

Both urged Judge Lomeli to reject the agreement and order the case to trial.

"Sheri deserves justice for what happened to her," said Naveen Sangji, 31, a Boston surgeon. "She was a brilliant, dynamic woman who was living her life to the fullest when the defendant, Harran, and UCLA cut it short."

Her 24-year-old brother, Hussain, said that not prosecuting Harran would amount to the legal system's caving-in to pressure from a powerful institution.

"We have waited nearly six years for some kind of justice for the excruciating pain Sheri suffered due to his negligence," Hussain said. "Sheri, her friends and family and the public that funds Harran's research and pays his salary deserve to see him stand trial for the crimes he has rightly been charged with."

Deputy Dist. Atty. Craig Hum said he understood the family's anguish, but said the settlement was "a fair resolution given the circumstances of the case." He said the decision to settle was made "at the highest levels of the D.A.'s office."

About 20 of Sangji's friends, relatives and colleagues submitted letters to Lomeli, describing in often wrenching detail the impact of her loss. Seemingly moved, Lomeli said that Sangji "came to life in this court" and he pledged to monitor Harran's community service.

The judge also doubled Harran's agreed-upon community service obligation, from 400 hours to 800.

Harran, who stared straight ahead as a slide show of Sangji's life was projected on a screen above him, did address the court, calling her death "the darkest time of my life."

"What happened to Sheri in my laboratory was absolutely horrible — and she was too young, too talented and had too bright a future for anyone to accept it," he said.

"Standing before you today, I understand that . . . I was ultimately responsible for the safety of the personnel in my laboratory," he said. "I have always felt I failed Sheri, and I deeply mourn her loss. I can only hope that, if not today, perhaps someday, [her family] can accept my deepest condolences and sympathies for their loss."

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