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NRC SCHEDULES CONFERENCE IN PUERTO RICO ON RADIATION SAFETY AT HOSPITAL METROPOLITANO

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff has scheduled a predecisional enforcement conference on January 13 at Hospital Metropolitano in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico to discuss with hospital officials concerns related to apparent violations of NRC safety requirements associated with use of radioactive material for treatment of patients.

NRC inspections at the hospital last September 24 and October 21 resulted in identification of apparent violations related to (1) failure to control and maintain constant surveillance over licensed, radioactive material and (2) multiple instances of failure to promptly inventory radioactive material after use.

On May 18, 1996, a physician unfamiliar with new equipment temporarily lost a 7.6 millicurie Cesium-137 radioactive source at 12:45 a.m. following treatment of a patient. The patient was discharged from the hospital the same day at 10:30 a.m., but the source remained on the floor of the room for 55 hours before being identified as lost and recovered on May 20. Hospital records indicate personnel entries to the room prior to recovery of the source were of short duration by the nursing and housekeeping staff. The hospital estimates that radiation levels at the patient's bed were at 1.3 millirem per hour, and the maximum estimated exposure for the hospital staff was 9.3 millirem to the whole body.

The physician apparently failed to account for the lost source immediately because of unfamiliarity with the new equipment, and a technologist did not discover the mistake until May 20 while conducting an inventory.

Federal regulations require that promptly after removal from a patient, radioactive sources must be returned to their storage area and counted to assure that all have been returned. The NRC inspector's review of therapy records indicated that the licensee had failed on five other occasions to promptly inventory radioactive sources after patient treatment. No other indications of material being lost were found.

The enforcement conference will begin at the hospital, located at Carretera 21, No. 1785, URB.Las Lomas, Rio Piedras, at 9:00 a.m. It is open to observation by members of the public and the press. NRC officials will be available at its conclusion to answer

questions from interested observers.

The decision to hold the conference does not mean that a determination has been made that a violation has occurred or that enforcement action will be taken. The purpose is to discuss apparent violations along with their causes and safety significance, to provide the licensee an opportunity to point out errors that may have been made in NRC inspection reports, and to enable the company to outline its proposed corrective actions.

No decisions on enforcement action will be made at the conference. NRC officials will decide at a later time whether escalated enforcement action, such as a civil penalty, is appropriate.