

No. 92-173
Tel. 301-504-2240

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
(Thursday, December 3, 1992)

NRC INVESTIGATES INCIDENT INVOLVING RADIOACTIVE SOURCE
USED FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff is investigating the loss of a radioactive source from a medical treatment facility in Indiana, PA, on November 16, and its subsequent discovery when it set off an alarm on a radiation monitor at the entrance to a waste disposal facility in Warren, Ohio, on November 27.

According to preliminary information received by the NRC, the source was used on November 16 in the Indiana (PA) Regional Cancer Center of Oncology Services Corporation to treat an 82-year-old woman for cancer. Officials of the facility said they performed no radiation treatments with the source after that date.

The source has been recovered and returned to the medical treatment facility. It is a tiny, radioactive piece of the element iridium-192 having a radioactivity of 3.7 curies.

The patient, a resident of the nearby Scenery Hill Nursing Home, was returned there after treatment, and died in the nursing home on November 21. From materials found in the box of trash with the radiation source, it appears the source was disposed of with the nursing home's segregated biologically contaminated trash, destined for incineration.

Preliminary information from NRC representatives who were sent to the area is that the radioactive source apparently became detached from the cable that contained it. The cable is part of a machine used to insert the source into previously emplaced catheters in the patient's body. The source apparently remained in the patient's body when she was returned to the nursing home.

An NRC Incident Investigation Team (IIT) has been dispatched to the Indiana, PA area and will visit other locations as deemed necessary. The team is led by Dr. Carl Paperiello, Deputy Administrator of the NRC's Region III office in Glen Ellyn, IL. Assisting him are technical specialists from NRC Headquarters and regional offices and a physician consultant to the NRC to look

into the question of how the patient, and possibly others, may have been affected by exposure to the source.

The IIT will thoroughly review the facts related to the event, identify the probable cause as to why it happened and make appropriate findings and conclusions to form the basis for any follow-on actions. It is expected that the team report will be issued within about 45 days from the time the team completes its on-site activities.

The licensee has agreed to:

- Retain the source for NRC examination, until further notice.
- Refrain from using the machinery for placing the source in patients until the NRC gives written permission.
- Preserve for the NRC the findings of the licensee's own investigation, determination of root causes of the incident, potential radiation exposures to the public and any involved workers, and preserve all evidence, equipment and materials until receiving written permission to release them to others.
- Notify every person found to have been involved in this incident of their possible exposure to radiation.

The NRC staff is working with the treatment center, the nursing home and the waste carrier, to identify all persons who may have had contact with the patient over the several days after her treatment, before and after her death, as well as waste carrier employees who may have come in proximity to the source.

#