

Author's Commentary on "Hazardous Materials"

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Expectations and Responsibilities of Interested Parties

New graduate students will have certain expectations from their advisers, such as guidance and training. When problems arise, most students assume the faculty member can offer support. Anna initially assumes that her relationship with Professor Creasin is fiduciary, and that each of them is receiving mutual benefits based on an implied trust. After their discussion in Professor Creasin's office, it is clear that their relationship is more paternalistic with Professor Creasin assuming he will make decisions on this issue. Anna is concerned about the safety of others in the lab, including Dan and Professor Creasin. She must also think of physical harm to the other lab students, particularly the students using the range top oven, as well as herself and her fetus. Future graduate students could be exposed to the lead compound, as well as other people who have reason to walk through the laboratory space. Additionally, Anna has reason to be concerned with the economic status of low-income graduate students who are financially dependent on Professor Creasin. Anna also has a responsibility to Dr. Moore to inform him of situations she is now trained to recognize as unsafe. Anna's final concern is directed toward Professor Creasin's university appointment, since she has agreed to work under his guidance and do research for him that supports his overall goals. Anna also has expectations about her own career goals and financial security while enrolled in graduate school.

She has reason to be concerned that these could be compromised if she is forced to report the situation to the Materials Safety and Policy Department against Professor Creasin's wishes.

Professor Creasin has many responsibilities toward his students, including ensuring their safety and providing the funding that he has promised. While his primary concern should be with the health and safety of his students, he seems to be most concerned with the status of his tenure and research papers. His progress also affects his students, since their work would most likely be discontinued if he were to leave State U.

Professor Creasin knowingly violated safe lead levels and failed to comply with biohazard research regulations. Professor Creasin is also aware that students eat and cook food in a laboratory setting. The drilling of the solid compound is another unacceptable practice due to creation of airborne particles. Professor Creasin describes these unsafe practices as "a small problem" and says he will consider looking into the situation only after his tenure is assured. Correcting the situation would inconvenience him financially and professionally.

Professor Creasin expects that his students will work for him, since he is supporting them financially, and that they will contribute to his research. He expects to have the final decision on matters in conflict, and he assumes that the students will not go over his head when there is a disagreement.

Dan expects to benefit from the publication of ground-breaking research and assumes that the project will continue. He will lose time and effort if the project were shut down. He expects Professor Creasin to act as a mentor to him, and he assumes that he will think of Dan's safety and well being. Dan's main concern is unknown. He could be very upset with Professor Creasin for allowing unsafe lead levels, or he might agree that the deviations are irrelevant and, since he will only be working on the project for a limited time, the professional gain will outweigh these risks.

Options for Actions and Arguments for Acting

Anna has several choices, the simplest of which is doing nothing. Frequently the

best choice is not the easiest. Anna appears to have taken the safety lectures seriously. She has made an initial attempt to correct the situation by informing Professor Creasin of the safety hazard. She also notices that students are using the oven in an unsafe manner when she returns to the lab. Although she is a new graduate student, she has probably witnessed this practice before, but she was unaware of the hazards of airborne lead particles. The other students have not benefitted from the safety seminar and probably assume that cooking in the oven is safe. There is now a differential in knowledge between Anna and the other students. The only other person who is informed about the hazard is Professor Creasin, and he will not be pursuing the problem for a while, if at all.

Keeping quiet does not seem to be the option that Anna would be the most comfortable with, in light of the problems it can mean for her and the other students. If Anna believes that she can still maintain a fiduciary relationship with Professor Creasin, then she could try approaching him again with notes she has taken from the seminar, explaining that these are the guidelines set up by Dr. Moore and not her own arbitrary standards. Anna is now forced to decide whether she will break the relationship by speaking to someone in authority about her concerns or succumb to the pressure Professor Creasin is placing on her.

An intermediate option is to tell all of the graduate students in the lab about the safety lectures and not mention her discussion with their faculty adviser. This course of action allows Anna to remove the knowledge differential and makes all the students responsible for their own decisions. If Anna does not mention that she has spoken with Professor Creasin, she can later say that she spoke to the students before he told her not to mention it to anyone else. Although she would be intentionally lying, it can be argued that the moral rule of not hurting others imposes a higher burden than not lying. Although lying about when the students were told the truth and intentionally failing to inform the students about the safety risks can both be classified as deception, utilitarian ethics would classify the lie as less deceptive. Although Anna would be lying to Professor Creasin, the greatest good might arise from informing the students.

Professor Creasin has deceived the students in his lab. He designed the experiment even though he realized that it would be potentially harmful to the student working on it and other students in the vicinity. His anger implies he might retaliate against Anna if she were to blow the whistle; retaliation would fall under the category of misconduct. The consequences of Professor Creasin's unsafe practices can harm

individuals inside and outside of the lab setting.

Arguments for Doing Nothing

The case study is written from the perspective of a single person, Anna. It is Anna who considers Professor Creasin to be petty and easily upset. Only Anna attended the seminar and had the initial perception that a problem existed. Anna has not yet discussed the problem with Dr. Moore, so her conclusions are based only on information from the seminar. Professor Creasin has explained to her that the violation is only a small problem and that he will look into it later. Perhaps Anna has been wrong about her assessments of Professor Creasin and the problem with the lead. Perhaps he will correct the situation at the end of the semester. Professor Creasin has more knowledge about the material science field in general and specifically with the experiment that he designed. Anna stands to lose her relationship with Professor Creasin and disrupt the lab during an investigation if her analysis of the situation is incorrect.