



The University of Hong Kong

# SAFETY MATTERS

June 2, 2011

To: List 'C'

## **A Fatal Accident in a Machine Workshop at Yale University**

A Yale University student, Michele Dufault, was found dead in a machine workshop of Yale University on 12 April 2011, just a month before her graduation. It was subsequently reported by the University management that Michele, a senior majoring in astronomy, had her hair caught in a fast-spinning lathe and died from suffocation by neck compression. Immediately after the accident, the University President initiated a review of the safety policies and practices of laboratories and workshops where power equipment is used by students.

This is sadly the second widely reported fatal accident involving students/researchers in the U.S. in the past three years. The last one happened to a research assistant at UCLA in December 2008.

It is evident from the reports in the media that a number of factors might have contributed to the tragedy at Yale. The victim appeared to be working alone in the workshop when the accident happened. Could the outcome of the accident have been different if she had not worked alone in that high-risk process? It was also uncertain how her hair got caught in the moving part of the lathe. Was her hair properly tied back? Has she received sufficient training in using the lathe? As the accident investigation by the authorities is still going on, the full picture is not yet known. However, this accident reminds us all of the need to remain vigilant of machine safety, particularly when students are involved.

If your department runs a machine workshop where power equipment is used for teaching and research, you may wish to review the safety policies and procedures applicable to your workshop, and further strengthen your safety system in light of the recent accident at Yale. Below are some of the issues you may want to look into and re-visit:

- Are there policies and rules on access by different groups to the power equipment?
- Is there any mechanism for enforcing mandatory safety training before staff/students start using the power equipment?
- Are there any in-house rules for working alone in the machine workshop?
- Are all dangerous moving parts of the machinery properly guarded according to legal requirements?
- Are there general safety rules (for example, in relation to long hair and loose clothing, etc.) laid down for personnel using the machine workshop?

If you need any advice or assistance in your review, the Safety Office would be glad to offer our help on the matter.



Dr. Edmund Hau  
Director of Safety

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c.c. Secretary, SHEC