



INTERACTIONS WITH SPANISH-SPEAKING HOUSEKEEPING PERSONNEL AT UC IRVINE REGARDING RADIATION SAFETY ISSUES

Many of the members of the housekeeping staff at UC Irvine are native Spanish speakers with limited English speaking skills. In spite of this, the housekeepers need to perform their duties in research laboratories in which English is the primary language spoken, and in which nearly all radiation safety (and other) warning labels and signs are in English. ***Unless they are adequately trained concerning basic radiation safety rules and policies in Spanish, problems are likely to occur.***

For the past several years, housekeeping personnel have received radiation safety instruction in Spanish as a part of their formal training. *[Previously, radiation safety issues were included as part of the on-site orientation of new housekeepers when they first visited the laboratories they would be cleaning.]* The present formal training includes reading a radiation safety factsheet written in Spanish, asking their supervisors any questions they might have regarding the contents of the factsheet, and then signing the last page to verify that the document was read and understood.

Unfortunately, the new housekeepers are asked to assimilate a large amount of information over a very short period of time concerning a variety of issues. For that reason, they might not have sufficient time to completely digest the radiation safety information that they are provided, and some confusion on important matters might persist. The information below is intended to assist you in your interactions with the housekeeping staff, and to give you some ideas concerning the identification of possible language-related radiation safety problems.



Degree of Understanding

In the past, cases have been reported to EH&S in which housekeeping personnel have appeared to understand instructions given to them in English without really comprehending the meaning of what they were told. For example, in several instances, housekeepers were told in English not to dump the contents of radioactive waste boxes with the normal trash. They have seemingly understood, but within minutes they have been observed to be doing what they were just told not to do.

It is best to never assume that your words are understood in such cases. Rather, have Spanish speaking individuals communicate important information to the housekeepers. A good choice for this would be the supervisor of the housekeeping staff (Gilbert Muñoz; 949-824-5536). He is bilingual, and is a pleasure to interact with. Alternatively, contact Rick Mannix of EH&S (949-824-6098), who has sufficient Spanish conversational ability to get your message across to your housekeeper.

Cleaning Radioactive Materials Use and Storage Areas

Housekeepers on campus are hardworking, dedicated workers and they occasionally unwittingly clean or attempt to clean areas that they shouldn't. They will also occasionally remove items that they believe to be regular trash without inquiring about it. Some examples of this are given below.



- a) **A person in a research laboratory drops a vial of ^{32}P , which breaks and spills its contents onto the floor.** The person who dropped the vial leaves behind a note that says “Stay away – ^{32}P spill”, exits the laboratory, and goes to get his supervisor who is eating lunch outside the building. When the two of them return, they find out that their housekeeper has mopped up the spill, and then proceeded to mop the rest of the floor with the same mop. A small spill became a very large spill.

This problem could have been avoided if the person who created the spill had arranged for somebody else to monitor it, had locked the door behind him as he left, or had written a warning note (it would likely have to be in English and Spanish) to alert people who could enter during his absence of the presence of the spill.

- b) **The personnel working in a laboratory keep radioactive sharps (mostly syringe needles) in a soda can located on a workbench.** There is a small piece of radiation caution tape on the can, but the tape does not cover the brand name of the soda. A housekeeper finds the can on the workbench, looks inside to see if it has soda inside, sees that it doesn't, but does not recognize that the items inside are hazardous. The can is taken by the housekeeper to be returned later for the aluminum deposit.

Always make sure that containers like soda or coffee cans that are used to store radioactive sharps or other hazardous items are clearly marked as hazardous, and that the labels on the containers are properly obliterated. It is best to store sharps containers (and other hazardous materials/items) in locations relatively inaccessible to housekeepers.

- c) **Personnel in a laboratory do not replace a radioactive waste box once it is full.** They continue to overload the box until the contents are falling to the ground. A housekeeper sees the gloves and other items on the floor, and places them into the normal trash container.

Things found on the floor that appear to be used and discarded will often be assumed to be regular trash and will be picked up by housekeeping personnel. Make sure that contaminated items are not left on the floor!

Recognizing Hazardous Materials

The housekeepers at UC Irvine are trained to clean rooms and remove trash; they do a very capable job regarding those tasks. While they do receive some radiation safety training, they are by no means experts in recognizing when radioactive materials are present. For example, radioactive material caution signs are posted on doors to all laboratories in which radioisotopes are authorized whether they are actively being used or stored in the laboratories or not. Thus, the signs become part of the normal landscape, and housekeepers often ignore them.



Always make sure that housekeepers are protected when necessary, and they are made aware of all potential hazards. This might entail terminating some potentially dangerous activities temporarily when housekeepers are present, labeling hazardous items so there is no mistaking their potential danger, keeping items in areas that housekeepers do not have ready access to, turning housekeepers away when enhanced hazards are present, and in extreme cases, canceling housekeeping services entirely for some rooms. *[This is not uncommon for rooms in which virulent biohazardous agents are handled, or in rooms in which high power lasers are operated.]*

Communicating with Spanish-speaking Housekeepers

In order to effectively communicate radiation safety-related hazards to housekeeping personnel with limited English speaking skills, it is good to be familiar with some Spanish words and expressions related to safety and health issues. Some of these are provided below:



English

safety
radioactive materials
radiation
laboratory
chemical
dangerous
danger
caution
radioactive waste

Spanish Equivalent

seguridad
materiales radiactivos
radiacion
laboratorio
producto quimico
peligroso
peligro
precaucion
basura radioactiva

Pronunciation

(accented syllable in caps)

seg-oor-ee-DAHD
maht-eer-ee-AHL-ehs rahd-ee-ahk-TEE-vohs
rahd-ee-ahs-see-OHN
lahb-ohr-ah-TOW-ree-oh
proh-DOOK-toe KEE-mee-koh
pehl-ee-GROW-so
pehl-EE-grow
pree-cah-oo-see-OWN
bahs-SOO-rah rahd-ee-oh-ahk-TEE-vah

Pronunciation

English

contamination
contaminated area
Stay away!
Do not touch!
Do not dump!
Do not enter!
Do you understand?
Do not clean today
Be careful!
Sharp objects

Spanish Equivalent

contaminacion
area contaminada
Mantengase lejos!
No tocar!
No tirar!
No entrar!
Entiende?
No limpiar hoy
Tenga cuidado!
Objetos agudos

(accented syllable in caps)

kohn-tah-mee-nah-see-OWN
AH-ree-ah cone-tahm-ee-NAH-dah
mahn-TEN-gah-seh LAY-hose
no tow-CAHR!
no tee-RAHR!
no ehn-TRAHR!
ehn-tee-EHN-deh?
no leem-pee-AHR oy
TEN-gah kwee-DAH-do
ohb-HEH-toes ah-GOO-dose

Of course, it is always good to know a few polite words and expressions such as the following:

English

hello
goodbye
please
thank you
yes
no
How are you?
I'm doing well
See you tomorrow

Spanish Equivalent

hola
adios
por favor
gracias
si
no
Como esta?
Bien
Hasta mañana

Pronunciation

(accented syllable in caps)

OH-la
ah-dee-OS
pore FAH-vore
GRAH-see-ahs
see
no
KOH-moe es-TAH?
bee-EHN
AHS-tah mahn-YAH-nah

Conclusion

The housekeeping staff at UC Irvine does an excellent job in improving the quality of our working environment through their hard work. It would be difficult to imagine what our laboratories and offices would look like without their help. Unfortunately, communication problems can occasionally lead to problems. By knowing some simple Spanish words and expressions, it is more likely that you will be able to avoid some communication-related pitfalls. Alternatively, physically demonstrating what you want a housekeeper to do or not do often works well.



When it is critically important that certain concepts be thoroughly understood by a housekeeper who speaks little or no English, do not attempt to communicate those concepts yourself if you are not somewhat fluent in Spanish. Seek out a bilingual person (who speaks both Spanish and English) to assist you. When necessary, you can ask for assistance from Gilbert Muñoz (949-824-5536) or from the direct supervisor of the person who cleans your laboratory. Most of the supervisors speak English well. Unless you know how to count to ten in Spanish, ask the housekeeper to write down the phone number of his/her supervisor:



Please write down the phone number of your supervisor.

Escribame el numero de telephono de su jefe, por favor.

Ehs-KREE-bah-meh ehl NOO-mehr –oh deh tell-EH-phone-oh deh soo HEFF-ay, pohr FAH-vohr

Note: Make sure it is clear that you are not calling to complain about your cleaning services. Smiling and asking nicely for the supervisor’s phone number should put the housekeeper at ease. If you still sense apprehension, say:

There is no problem. I have a question.

No hay problema. Tengo una pregunta.

No eye probe-LEHM-ah. TEN-go OO-nah preg-OON-tah.



If you ever have radiation safety problems caused by poor communication with Spanish-speaking housekeepers, call Rick Mannix of EH&S at 949-824-6098.