

P. Aarne Vesilind's Commentary on "Hazardous Materials"

Commentary On
Hazardous Materials

Professor Creasin is wrong. Consider the simplest test of ethical behavior: If your actions were on the front page of the *New York Times* the next day, would you be proud of yourself? Would Professor Creasin be able to explain satisfactorily why he allowed a student to conduct an unsafe experiment and why he further allowed his students to eat in a laboratory that clearly had airborne contaminants?

A more difficult question is what Anna should do. My observations in ethical quandaries have been that more often than not, the more information available to affected individuals, the better. I believe she should immediately tell all the students what she has found out and advise them to at the very least not eat in the laboratory. Graduate students are intelligent people. They don't need professors to take care of them. If they find out that the experiments are most likely contaminating the indoor air with lead, they will take precautions, irrespective of what the professor will say.

Should Dan continue his experiments? That is a tricky question, because the answer depends on the alternatives. As the case study reads, constructing expensive hoods would require spending money that would be made available by firing several students. Dan would not be one of the students fired because the laboratory would be constructed for his experiments. Professor Creasin should either fire Dan first and save the renovation money, or renovate the lab so Dan can finish his experiments.

But that is not the main point. The main point is that it is far better to lose a job than it is to suffer from lead poisoning.