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NRC ISSUES NOTICES OF VIOLATIONS FOLLOWING INVESTIGATION OF IMPROPER EFFORTS TO DISPOSE OF WASTE FROM NEW JERSEY CENTER

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has issued several Notices of Violation in connection with improper efforts to dispose of radioactive waste removed from a New Jersey mental health facility in 1997. Among those receiving notices are the center, the state official who authorized the incorrect classification of the material, a Pennsylvania firm hired to dispose of the waste and the president of that company.

In October 1997, the NRC was notified that a tritium exit sign had been broken by a patient at the Arthur Brisbane Child Treatment Center, which is located in Farmingdale, N.J., and operated by the New Jersey Department of Human Services. The sign held tritium, a radioactive isotope used to illuminate the device but one that releases a relatively weak form of radiation and is not hazardous as long as it is contained. When the sign was ruptured, the release of the tritium created extensive contamination that required almost 60 barrels to clean up and remove.

Following an NRC inspection at the center, an inquiry was launched by the NRC Office of Investigations to look at whether the material had been disposed of in a proper manner. The Office of Investigations subsequently determined that the chief of the Bureau of Environmental Compliance for the New Jersey Department of Human Services had deliberately and inappropriately classified the waste as medical waste.

The Office of Investigations also learned that the firm hired by New Jersey to dispose of the waste, SMI East Coast Medical Waste Inc. of Morrisville, Pa., was not authorized to handle such material. Despite this fact, SMI removed from Arthur Brisbane a barrel holding the broken exit sign, which contained about 12 curies of tritium, and stored it at its facility awaiting disposal. SMI also removed several other barrels containing contaminated objects and shipped them to a medical waste incinerator in South Carolina not authorized to accept radioactive material. (The waste was retrieved before being burned there.)

In issuing a Notice of Violation to the Arthur Brisbane facility, the NRC notes that a fine is not being imposed because South Carolina issued a \$15,000 civil penalty against the New Jersey

Department of Human Services in January 1998 for violations related to the event. Further, all exit signs containing radioactive material have since been removed from the facility and therefore the center is no longer an NRC licensee.

SMI was not fined by the NRC because there were no radioactive doses to individuals or potential doses that would create a serious health risk, and the material was eventually disposed of in a proper manner.

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