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Student injured in Boston College chemical accident

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By Ben Wolford and Vivian Yee, Globe Correspondents

A Boston College chemistry student was injured when a beaker exploded during an experiment this morning, cutting her face and forcing the evacuation of Merkert Chemistry Center, officials said.

The student was working alone in the lab with a small amount of thionyl chloride -- a substance commonly used in organic chemistry experiments -- when it reacted violently, according to fire department spokesman Steve MacDonald.

The student, Hee Yeon Cho, received cuts on her face and minor burns on her hands, he said.

Boston College spokesman Jack Dunn said Cho, who recently finished her fourth year in the doctoral program, subsequently left the lab to take care of the cuts while fellow graduate students notified Boston College police. The university then notified the Boston fire department.

"This was a minor chemical reaction that caused the beaker she was using to break," Dunn said.

Fire crews and a hazmat team responded to a call at 10:47 a.m., but cleared the scene by 1 p.m., MacDonald said. Throughout the early afternoon, some responders' vehicles remained at the lab at 2609 Beacon St. in Brighton, but people were allowed in and out of the building.

After going through a series of showers in a mobile decontamination unit, Cho was taken to St. Elizabeth's Medical Center, where she was treated for injuries that do not appear life-threatening, MacDonald said. No one else was injured, Dunn said.

After the beaker ruptured, Cho put a paper towel over the cut on her cheek and then drove herself home, said Chris Schuster, 25, a graduate chemistry student at the scene.

Her return home complicated the cleanup effort: Crews also had to decontaminate her car

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and her apartment in Brighton, MacDonald said.

“It was more challenging because the student left,” he said.

A chemistry professor came to the lab and determined responders should dilute the thionyl chloride with “large amounts of water,” MacDonald said, and Boston College brought in a cleaning company.

It is still unclear what caused the reaction, he said.

Thionyl chloride reacts strongly with moisture and can be dangerous to humans if vapors are inhaled, said Lawrence Scott, Cho’s professor. The chemical can be used to make mustard gas and nerve toxins.

“Honestly, I think she was probably never expecting this to happen. This seems like a somewhat standard procedure,” Schuster said regarding the experiment.

Schuster said chemistry students at Boston College are required to take a lab safety training course. While it is uncommon for students to work alone, the department’s guidelines for lab safety do not forbid it, according to a document posted online by the Boston College Office of Environmental Health and Safety.

Still, researchers are warned not to work with hazardous or potentially explosive compounds by themselves, said Kai Hong, 26, another chemistry graduate student who was going to the building this afternoon.

Dunn said that to his knowledge, Cho, whom he called a “skilled researcher,” did not violate any safety procedures.

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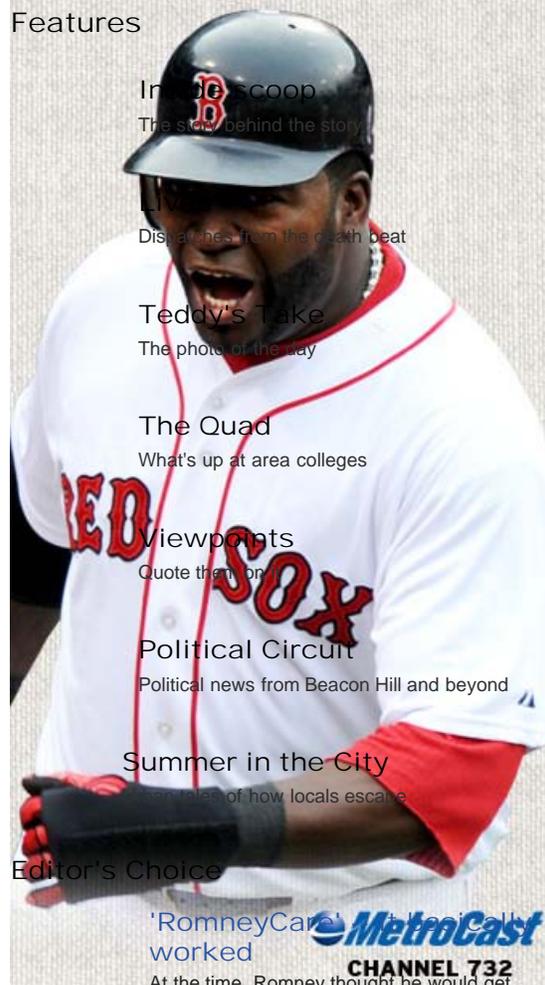
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