

Scientific society withholds honour over lab death

The American Association for the Advancement of Science has reversed its decision to make chemist Patrick Harran a fellow.

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Brian van der Brug/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

Chemist Patrick Harran faced criminal charges after an accidental death in his lab.

A US scientific society has decided not to award an honorary fellowship to chemist Patrick Harran, who was prosecuted for the 2009 accidental death of a 23-year-old researcher in his lab.

On 22 December, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) announced that chemists in the organization had voted not to install Patrick Harran, a chemist at the University of California, Los Angeles, as an honorary fellow. In November, Harran's name appeared on a list of 347 scientists elected to receive the honour for 2015. But after the organization's chemistry section learned of the death of Sheharbano Sangji resulting from a chemical fire in Harran's lab, the section reconsidered his nomination and "voted not to move forward" with the fellowship, the AAAS said in a statement.

"This action is huge, and impacts every scientist who aspires to be named for national recognition or international recognition," says Neal Langerman, head of the consultancy Advanced Chemical Safety in San Diego, California.

Case history

Sangji died after suffering third-degree burns when a chemical, *t*-butyl lithium, that she was handling with a syringe ignited. Sangji was not wearing appropriate protective clothing. Los Angeles prosecutors charged Harran with four counts of "willful violation of an occupational safety and health standard causing the death of an employee". The case has not been tried. In 2014, Harran reached an agreement with prosecutors in which he did not admit guilt, but agreed to conduct a series of safety-training courses for students and to perform other community-service measures for five years.

"If I were a young chemist, and I set a career goal to win a Priestley Medal" — the highest honour conferred by the American Chemical Society — "this says that if my lab has a serious incident, I may never achieve my goal," Langerman says.

AAAS spokesman Gavin Stern says that he does not know why information about the accident was not provided when Harran was initially nominated for a fellowship. As per AAAS procedure, Harran's name was put forward by three colleagues who have already

received the honour. The nomination was approved by the chemistry section and then by the AAAS Council, Stern says. He also says that fellowship election is “a member-driven process, done without any interference or influence by AAAS staff” and that the organization is considering making procedural changes as a result of the episode.

Harran has not replied to a request for comment. His nomination drew widespread condemnation, including from Sangji’s family, who urged AAAS to rescind the honour in a letter dated 9 December.

“We ask you to take this principled stance, not only out of respect for Sheri and her suffering, for the integrity of scientific research, or to maintain the prestige of your award, but also for the far reaching implications your stance will have for laboratory safety,” her family wrote in the letter.

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