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State agency fines Hopkins \$370,000 on radiation issues

By Kelly Brewington | kelly.brewington@baltsun.com

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The Maryland Department of the Environment announced Friday that it fined the Johns Hopkins University and Johns Hopkins Hospital \$370,000 - the largest such penalty ever paid by Hopkins - after finding problems related to how the university and hospital handled radiation materials, maintained radiation machines and administered radiation to one patient.

The bulk of the 19 alleged violations, found between May 2007 and September 2009, deal with security issues, not public health, said Dawn Stoltzfus, a spokeswoman for the Department of the Environment. For instance, state inspectors found containers of solutions used for research weren't properly labeled or securely stored, resulting in a security risk. The concern was that the institution was "not maintaining a culture of safety," Stoltzfus said.

"We want to prevent the loss of control over radiation that could result in theft or misuse of these isotopes," she said.

The fine is the result of a settlement agreement between the state and the institution. Hopkins does not admit liability and must allow the agency to attend its next four radiation safety committee meetings.

The problems were discovered during routine inspections, beginning May 14, 2007, with a follow-up that September. In addition to security concerns, inspectors found contractors who were not wearing devices that monitor their radiation exposure.

Then, in May 2009, Hopkins officials notified inspectors about a 61-year-old patient who was given radiation to a part of his body not intended for treatment. The patient, however, was slated to get treatment to that area at a different time, said Joann Rodgers, a Hopkins spokeswoman. When caregivers found the error, they adjusted the patient's treatment so there was no overlap, she said. The issue accounted for \$10,000 of the settlement payment and the patient was not injured, she said.

"No patients or visitors were put in harm's way, nor were faculty or staff members exposed inappropriately to radiation," she said.

Rodgers said while the institution has "a difference of opinion" with the agency's allegations, it has taken them seriously and has worked to strengthen its existing safety and monitoring procedures.

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