



# Curatorial Safety

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## Be Careful What You Collect

Recently, a small museum was approached by a local donor, and felt compelled to accept two 1950s chemistry sets as part of a larger donation of items. The chemistry sets included all of the original remaining chemicals, some of which were found to be poisonous or even explosive (even more so as the chemicals were fifty years old and unstable). Five bottles of chemicals were missing their labels and could not be readily identified. The museum staff contacted a local chemist for assistance, who recommended that the museum find someone to properly dispose of the chemicals. The museum staff then spoke with their county's Office of Emergency Management about the situation.

The county official contacted the state chemist, and they both determined that the museum did indeed have a dangerous situation on their hands and arranged for proper disposal of the known chemicals, and testing of the unknown chemicals preparatory to their proper disposal. The disposal effort included the State Patrol's HAZMAT team, the county Office of Emergency Management, the local fire department, local ambulance/EMT standing by, and city and county public works departments. Luckily no one at the museum was injured, and all of the chemicals were properly disposed of.

Proper disposal of hazardous waste can be an expensive process. Although several of the agencies waived fees and considered this a training exercise, the museum was responsible for other fees. At the same time, the museum could have been fined for illegal possession of certain regulated chemicals.

You should never accept museum donations containing chemicals, poison, explosives, or other hazardous materials. These items could seriously injure and even kill staff members or the public. They could also be an environmental hazard: as a resource management agency we should be following (hopefully exceeding) all relevant environmental laws and regulations. Acquisition of many of these items is also illegal under federal, state, and local law.

The museum learned an expensive lesson. Hopefully we can benefit from their experience.