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NRC UPGRADES INSPECTION TEAM LOOKING INTO WORKER EXPOSURES AT PUERTO RICO IRRADIATOR FACILITY

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has upgraded a Special Inspection Team sent to Puerto Rico early last week to look into an event at an irradiator in Puerto Rico. The upgraded team, called an Augmented Inspection Team (AIT), will continue its work at Baxter Healthcare Corporation in Aibonito, Puerto Rico. The irradiator uses radioactive material (sources) to sterilize a variety of medical devices.

On April 21, the operators were lowering the source racks back into the pool when one rack jammed, leaving the radioactive source exposed. Radiation levels outside the irradiator room remained at normal levels. The NRC Special Inspection Team initially sent to follow up on this event found that failures of the limit switches led company employees to bypass certain interlocks in order to enter the irradiator. Two individuals entered the irradiator while the source was exposed. Initial dose estimates and dosimetry analysis performed for the two individuals who entered the irradiator while the source rack was exposed indicate that the individuals may have received a dose of approximately 4.1 rem to the whole body. (The annual occupation dose limit is 5 rem/year.) Additional efforts aimed at confirming the dose are ongoing.

The team was upgraded to an Augmented Inspection Team because the event had the potential to cause an exposure greater than 5 rem to an individual. This heightened level of inspection includes naming a senior regional manager to lead the team, the addition of a headquarters based radiation specialist and a greater focus on fact-finding and root cause analysis.

The objective of an AIT is to conduct a timely, thorough, and systematic inspection related to significant operational events at NRC-licensed facilities. The NRC team at Baxter will assess the health and safety significance of the event. Members will collect, analyze, and document factual information and evidence sufficient to determine the cause, conditions, and

circumstances of the event. The team also will consider the adequacy of the company's actions during and in response to the event.

A written report will be issued within 30 days of the end of the inspection.

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