

NEW YORK | JULY 3, 2010

Nuclear Material Removed at Hospital

3 July 2010

The Wall Street Journal (Online and Print)

BY SEAN GARDINER

Federal agents and NYPD detectives closed down West 12th Street this week. They entered a building and worked through the night as counterterrorism detectives stood watch.

Their mission? To unbolt a 4,000-pound, lead-lined piece of equipment with enough radioactive material in it to make it a "dirty bomb" concern. Their location? St. Vincent's Hospital.

The officials placed the machine inside an 8-foot-tall hazardous-materials cylinder and loaded in onto a tractor trailer. Then the semi, flanked by federal escort vehicles, set off on a secret cross-country trip. It wasn't until they reached the storage facility in the "southwestern part of the country" two days later that officials were given the OK to talk about the mission.

Few outside the medical community have likely heard of the machine that sparked the worry: a cesium-137 blood irradiator, which uses the radioactive isotope to sterilize blood. The National Nuclear Security Administration, an equally obscure agency within the Department of Energy safeguarded the radioactive material.

The big concern, according to an NNSA official, is that the cesium, in the wrong hands, could potentially be used to make a "radiological dispersal device," also known as a dirty bomb, or left in a place where a large number of people could be exposed to it.

Exposure to cesium-137 could be lethal in a matter of minutes depending upon the distance and extent of exposure, NNSA officials said.

The efforts at St. Vincent's were unique, according to agency officials, because unlike most of the facilities using radioactive materials in the city, the hospital's forced closure meant that something had to be done to secure the radioactive cesium, about the size of a soda can, inside the machine.

A public-relations firm representing St. Vincent's in its bankruptcy proceedings didn't return a call seeking comment.