

Legal

Don't throw away radioactive sources

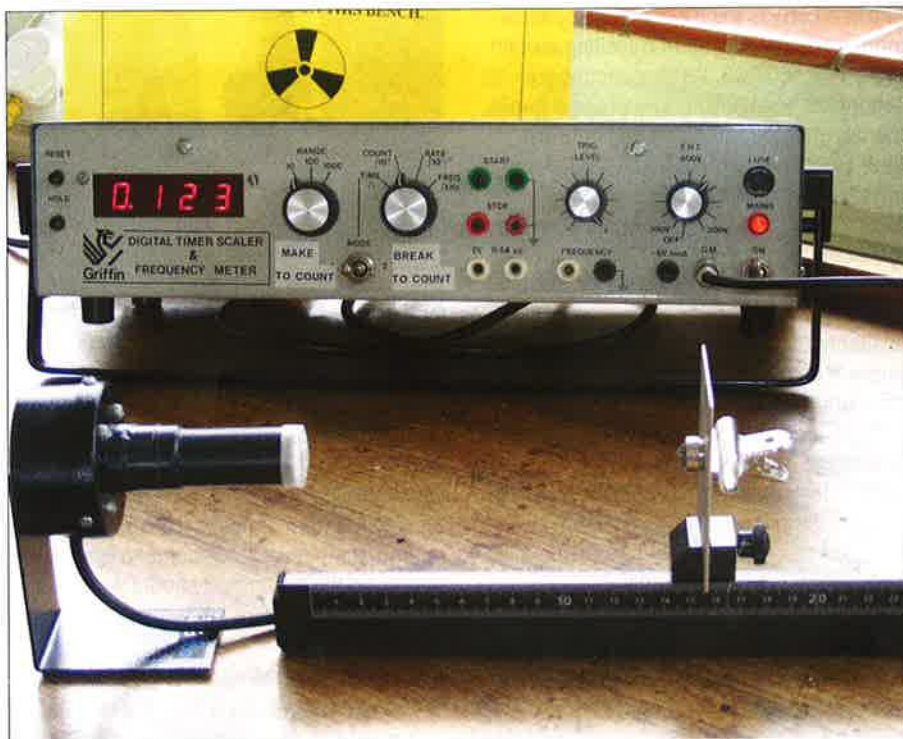
This article is a plea to do all that you can to hang on to your radioactive sources. We've been contacted by some schools reluctantly seeking to dispose of their radioactive sources. They have been forced to do so because of the apparently unavoidable increase in the cost of accessing a radiation protection adviser (RPA) – a requirement of all radiation employers. In each case, by shopping around, they have found a cheaper route to an RPA.

In short, we recommend contacting CLEAPSS – the advisory service for schools. They will be able to put you in contact with at least one radiation protection officer (RPO) who can act as your link to a CLEAPSS RPA.

The best source of advice about anything to do with safety in schools is CLEAPSS. It is a local government organisation that works in the interests of schools, science and safety. I am relying heavily on their expertise to write this article. In 1999, the regulations about using and storing radioactive sources changed. It became a requirement for any employer holding sources (above a certain level) to appoint a RPA with a qualification recognised by the HSE (before 1999, a science adviser could act as the RPA to schools). Given the likely costs to schools, CLEAPSS set up a team of 16 qualified RPAs. Schools could access these RPAs through a network of RPOs who were based in local authorities.

Recent changes to schools and local authorities have meant that some areas no longer have an RPO. In some cases, they have stopped offering a service altogether and in others they are using a private contractor as their RPA. This tends to be more expensive.

We have found that science departments have often been given information that is confusing and misleading – either by their local authority, a private RPA or a risk-management company. The legislation means that schools are required to appoint a qualified RPA. This has been the case since 1999. The changes to schools and local authorities may appear to mean that you have lost your link with an RPO; you may even feel that you are not entitled to use



Equipment used in classroom experiments to investigate radioactivity.

the CLEAPSS RPA service. However, that is not the case. Whether you are an academy, a free school, a college or a local authority school, that service is still available to you. You may need to contact a few local authorities before you find an RPO at a price that you can manage. But it is likely to be worth it and CLEAPSS can provide you with contacts.

Finally, if you need to make a case to a senior leader, here are some thoughts.

- There is no substitute for demonstrating real physical phenomena (simulations and animations help but are no replacement for seeing stuff happen in the real world).

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- If practical work disappears from the radioactivity topic (because of cost) what message does that send about the importance of practical work in general?
- If schools do not use real sources, this sends a message that radioactivity is inherently unsafe – too hazardous to use even low-level sources in school. What are the implications of this for public awareness at a time when the need for a new generation of nuclear-generating capacity is being discussed?
- There is a disposal cost (it is not the case that you can dispose of all sources by putting them in a container filled with mortar and adding this to the normal refuse).
- The cost of replacement is very high, so reversing any decision will be expensive.

For more information: there is a discussion group on TalkPhysics if you would like to share your experience on getting a low-cost service. Visit www.talkphysics.org/groups/4589.

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