

# UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, June/July 2012

## Back Health and Body Mechanics

### Careless Chris Feels the Burn...an Imaginary Scenario

It was mid-afternoon in the campus business office. Fictitious employees Ayat and Malcolm were assessing the contents of two large storage cabinets. "We'll need some garbage containers," said Ayat; "Better yet, some recycling bins, since most of this is just paper." The plan was to empty the cabinets and have them removed to make space for another work station. The two searched the floor of their building, located four recycling barrels and arranged them across from the cabinets. Then they set to work, tossing stacks of old brochures, obsolete file folders, glossy product catalogs and other materials into the containers.

Assorted paper items cascaded into the bins. Thick, heavy product catalogs alternated with rolled engineering prints, old photo files and miscellaneous office papers. By the end of the work day, three of the containers filled to the top, and the fourth was half-way full. Both cabinets stood empty, ready for re-use elsewhere in the department.

"OK, this was a dirty job, but it was worth it," said Malcolm. "I agree," said Ayat as she wiped her hands with damp paper towels. "We absolutely need the work space." "I've already put in my bid for this corner," said Malcolm as he tipped a sheaf of loose papers on top of the stacks of catalogs; "You can just see the window from here; the light is nice." Satisfied with their work, they prepared to call it a day. "This place is a disorganized mess at the moment. I hope the custodians get all this recycling and trash out of here tonight so we can have these cabinets moved out tomorrow," said Ayat as they headed back to their office.

At 7:30 that evening, two UC swing shift custodians, Careless Chris and his co-worker Jackie, moved their equipment into the area for routine cleaning. They split up to conduct their usual maintenance tasks. It was Chris's luck after an hour of work to turn the corner and see the furniture shifted around, stacks of paper on desks, and other unmistakable signs of remodeling. "Here we go again," he thought, looking down at the four recycling containers. He knew they would have to be moved to the building's rear elevator before he could continue cleaning.

Chris looked at his watch; 8:45 already, and still several tasks to finish. He knew Jackie was working on the other side of the building. "I should wait for her to help me with these bins," he thought; "But it's going to take me forever to find her and after all, this is just paper. What kind of custodian am I if I can't handle a bin of paper?"

With that, Careless Chris grabbed the first bin, hoisted it up and carried it out to the hallway. It was somewhat heavy and too bulky to see around very well, but he managed without too much trouble. He returned to the area where the other recycle bins waited for transport. "One down, three to go," he thought cheerfully as he prepared to pick up bin number two.

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Just as he had done with the first bin, Chris grabbed the edges of the container and lifted up quickly. To his amazement, the outcome was nothing like it had been with the previous lift. First of all, the bin didn't move off the ground by much. It was heavier than he thought a standard recycling bin could possibly be. At the same time, he felt a distinct snap in his lower back and a wave of intense pain. "My back!" he thought in alarm and immediately let go of the bin. But the damage had been done. He couldn't stand up straight and the pain in his back was intense. He hobbled over to one of the desks and called his supervisor's number.

While Chris waited for the supervisor to arrive, Jackie appeared, wondering where Chris had gone. She took one look at his anxious expression, the awkward way he was sitting and the nearby recycling bins and ventured a guess. "You tried to pick that up, didn't you?" she asked. "Don't talk to me," groaned Chris. "I know, I know. I shouldn't have tried to pick it up. My back is totally messed up. I don't know what's going to happen now." After confirming that help was on the way, Jackie looked closely at the recycle bins. "Chris, did you know what's in here?" she said; "there are dozens of heavy catalogs and piles of brochures down in the bottom. There were just some loose papers on top, so you didn't see how heavy this load really was."

Jackie stayed with Chris until the supervisor arrived to escort Chris to the Occupational Medical Clinic for a check-up. She and other co-workers visited him the following day as he lay in bed, recuperating. Chris was embarrassed to admit that he had known he was making a mistake when he tried to lift the bin.

He hadn't tipped it a bit to assess its weight, nor had he waited for help or used a dolly to move the load. He even pushed his luck in moving the lighter bin into the hallway by himself. Even though that weight hadn't caused a noticeable back injury, it did strain his back and shoulders somewhat, and put him at risk of tripping since it blocked his view of the path ahead.

Because of his back injury, Chris was forced to spend weeks off work, dealing with bed rest, icing, physical therapy, medication side effects and of course, a lot of pain. Chris's family was supportive, but his incapacitation and frustrated attitude took a toll on his personal relationships. When he returned to work, he was not able to resume his usual duties so his supervisor provided alternate work. It would be months before Chris was substantially recovered, and his doctor advised him to be very careful about putting any strain on his back for several more months. "All this discomfort and disruption, and why?" Chris asked himself. "If I had just moved that crazy bin the way I should have, none of this would have happened." Eventually, Chris made a full recovery, but he never forgot his experience with the innocent-looking recycle bin and took good care of his back from that day on.