

From May 5 and 7, 2002  
LAmonitor

### Lab could take care of its own cleanup

So, the New Mexico Environment Department proposes to issue the Los Alamos National Laboratory a compliance order to, in turn, encourage the Department of Energy to appropriate more money for environmental restoration.

The lab should give NMED a compliance order. For years NMED has been a bottleneck on the Environmental Restoration Program's critical path to an expeditious conclusion to its work: NMED issues vague and inconsistent requirements; routinely changes personnel who in turn issue countermanding vague and inconsistent requirements; fails in its responsibility by taking months and years to review and comment on lab reports and proposals for action; and demands cleanups based not on bona fide risk to human health and the environment, but on political, personal, junk science, or (my personal favorite) just plain feel-good grounds.

Rather than a compliance order, I would suggest something else. NMED and their co-obstructionists, the DOE, need get out of the way and let the laboratory spend what funding it does get on legitimate cleanup and site stabilization based on well-established risk considerations. In this world of wishful thinking, the job would be done in years rather than decades.

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General: letter to the editor regarding order

### Hospital doctors, staff deserve appreciation

A greedy bully.

Those are the first words that came to mind as I read about Banner Health Systems suit filed against the New Mexico Attorney General for obstructing the sale of Los Alamos Medical Center (May 3 Monitor). Unfortunately, while the community has the most to gain or lose from the outcome of this legal battle, we are mostly spectators. Banner would rather pay high-priced attorneys to fight for its right to take the community's charitable assets (now on two fronts with their suits against the South Dakota and New Mexico attorneys general) than leave those communities with the appreciated value of assets that are the result of many years of goodwill and community support.

Doesn't it just warm your heart to realize that over the years we have helped to fund Banner's \$1.9 billion dollar bulk that gives them the confidence to file these suits? While many have criticized our community and the laboratory for demonstrations of arrogance, certainly Banner sets a new standard for large corporations to strive for.

But rather than just smolder in our resentment and anger, let's go out of our way as a community to recognize and express appreciation to the physicians, nurses, technicians and other staff at the hospital who are working under extremely difficult conditions to continue to provide needed services to this community during what appears will be a prolonged period of uncertainty and turmoil.

While the battle rages for the physical assets of the hospital, these people really are the hospital. Thanks to all of you for hanging in there and continuing to care.

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### Letters

#### Line dividing safe and unsafe is not easily defined

By JOHN BARTLIT

The first document of our nation puts forth our human needs amazingly well: "... Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." In a sense, these words are what set our society, and its assigned regulators, on an endless quest for the line between safe and unsafe.

The line we seek should separate all that is safe from all that does harm, and do it with no mistake for each kind of person and any set of details. After all, any loss of life or liberty wastes happiness. In a Sunday light, the flawless line is clearly an idle dream of the Don Quixote in us all.

Yet our minds fog over in the rough-and-tumble of real issues, where we think knavery alone thwarts the ideal. Real life asks: How many fine particles are safe to breathe? How much of some toxic is safe for medical use? With no mistake, what should the speed limit be?

All three questions require assessing the public risk, but the problems of the task are grasped most easily by looking at the third question. Most of us know much more about speed than about toxics. What speed limit keeps us all safe from harm?

A bit of logic helps here. Since when things collide, a big truck does more harm than a small car, trucks should have a lower speed limit than cars. Since people have different makeups, the less-skilled drivers should have a lower speed limit. Since older folks react slower than younger ones, the seniors should have a lower speed limit. A truck with a less skilled, senior driver should travel at a still slower speed.

There's a fine mess — a bunch of speed limits on the same road. No problem though: We just set the speed limit that keeps us all safe from harm.

Let's see ... we have the trucks, the less-skilled drivers, the seniors, hmm. A speed of about 30 miles per hour on the freeway ought to cut the injuries down very close to zero.

Oops, here comes the next problem. Now people are on the road for a much longer time to get where they want to go. We need more roads sooner. We don't like more roads. Grumble de grumble ...

The whole story is this: Issues are never as simple as imagined in the rough-and-tumble. There are no perfect answers.

There is no line that separates all that is safe from all that does harm, with no mistake either way. When we try to drive down to zero the risk we have from one cause, the risk rises from another cause.

The same holds true for the other cases. If we think the safe limit for breathing fine particles should be near zero, to be on the safe side, we are left with few industrial products, no transportation, and little food.

We have lost some liberty and some happiness, and also some life.

If we think the safe limit is zero for a poison that helps a medical problem, we are left with the medical problem. We lose some life and

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