Colleague’s Concern Prevents Amputation

It was a chance encounter on a Wednesday afternoon in late September that may have saved Xavier Permanyer’s life.

Mike Kritscher is a Berkeley Lab engineer who works routinely on safety issues with scientists at the Advanced Light Source. He runs monthly safety circle meetings where Engineering Division staff and Lab scientists discuss safety matters. On that Wednesday he wanted to check-in with Permanyer, a recently hired mechanical engineer from ALBA, the synchrotron light source in Barcelona.

“I thought about giving him a phone call, but then thought, ‘I could use a stretch,’ and walked over to his office,” Kritscher remembers.

As they chatted, Permanyer decided on the spur of the moment to ask what he should do about this odd swelling in his ankle, which was making it harder to bike up the hill for him. “Maybe it was affecting my ability to work,” he thought. He rolled up his left pant leg.

“His ankle looked like a bratwurst,” recalls Kritscher. “It looked painful and worse than my own foot did, after I had broken it.”

Permanyer had gone to his doctor the day before and was given a test for gout. The results were negative, but there was a rise in infection-fighting white blood cells. The doctor was not available to see him, so another appointment was set for Friday.

Kritscher saw the need to act quickly. He walked his new charge to his electric GEM car and they scooted up the hill to Health Services. “I knew we had help available right here, so there was no persuasion needed,” says Kritscher. At the clinic, Dr. Peter Lichty was emphatic: Take him to the emergency room. Do not delay! Kritscher contacted Doug Taube, an ALS chemist and safety team member, who volunteered to drive Permanyer to Kaiser Oakland, where he was admitted immediately.

“They told me that if they could not stop this infection, they would have to amputate,” Permanyer says. “At first, I thought it was just not possible. Only afterwards did I become scared. If it had gotten into my blood, I could have died.”

A week later, he was discharged after successful treatment with intravenous antibiotics. As is usually the case in such infections, the microbe was never identified, and the cause — likely a small cut on his foot — was not determined. What mattered was that the antibiotics worked. “They told me I was very lucky to have come there so quickly,” he recalls. “If I had waited until Friday, I don’t know if I would still have this foot. Sometimes small things make a big difference.”

This story has a happy ending. Permanyer gets to keep his foot, and for his efforts Kritscher won a Safety Spot Award from the Lab’s Safety Culture Initiative. The brass pin bears the phrase “Safety is Elemental,” which was coined, incidentally, by the ALS Communications Group. The lesson here: A vibrant safety culture is not just about wise precautions around the Lab. It’s about taking care of each other, at home and on the job.