

# Toxic Thornhill high school subject of case study

BY ROY GREEN  
Staff Writer

When Vaughan paramedics and firefighters discovered a high school seemingly awash in a toxic substance last summer, they began preparing for the worst.

Anxious students were suffering from skin irritations and breathing difficulties because a powdery blue substance had been liberally sprinkled on doorknobs, handrails and in stairwells at St. Elizabeth Catholic High School in Thornhill.

Eleven students were sent to hospital and another 156 underwent on-site decontamination in the five hours following the 1:55 p.m. call to the Vaughan fire and EMS station.

The events of June 15 were the subject of a case study of a "CBRN disaster". The study took place at Ontario's first-ever Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear conference in Richmond Hill this week. More than 400 "first responders" — police, firefighters and paramedics from across Ontario — attended the two-day event.

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Morris Faccin  
Emergency Medical Services  
operations supervisor for region

Coming upon the anxious students made for some scary moments, Morris Faccin, operations supervisor for the region's Emergency Medical Services, recalled in an interview following the case study.

He was joined by Jim Orton, platoon chief with Vaughan's fire and rescue service, Insp. Tony Cusimano of York Regional Police and Joseph Mancuso, health protection manager with the region's health department.

"When you're dealing with an unknown substance you have to begin gearing up for the worst-case scenario," Mr. Faccin said.

The event, they later learned, began as an exam week prank when a student sprinkled visible stain powder, a non-toxic powder used to identify thieves. It can cause skin and eye irritation and can also be more serious for someone with asthma.

"We traced it to a laboratory in North Carolina; he ordered it off the Internet," said Insp. Cusimano, adding the incident turned out to be a near perfect example of "unified command" — the theme of the two-day conference.

Close to 100 firefighters, paramedics, police and medical personnel from Vaughan, Richmond Hill, Toronto and the region were at the school that day and involved in assisting and processing students, crowd control, investigation and security soon after the first call came in, Mr. Orton said.

"Though there was anxiety among the kids, there was no panic and we were able to shut the school down and close off certain areas in an orderly fashion," he said.

If there was one area where things were not coordinated, Mr. Faccin said, it was that the health unit wasn't immediately advised about the incident.

"We called public health



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Major-General (retired) Lewis MacKenzie was the keynote speaker for a two-day Chemical, Radiological and Nuclear conference at the Sheraton Parkway North Hotel Wednesday. The event was hosted by York Region Emergency Medical Services.

in very late; we weren't thinking about that right off the top," he said.

The health unit would have been able to assist with risk assessment, Mr. Mancuso said. "We learned we need to communicate a little bet-

ter. They weren't aware we should have been there (from the outset)," he said.

But all agreed the co-ordination of events that June day went pretty smoothly.

"It worked and we all learned from the incident,"

Mr. Orton said.

A day following the incident, even as York Regional Police were studying school surveillance videos, a 17-year-old student turned himself in to police and was charged with mischief.



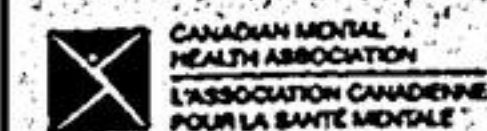
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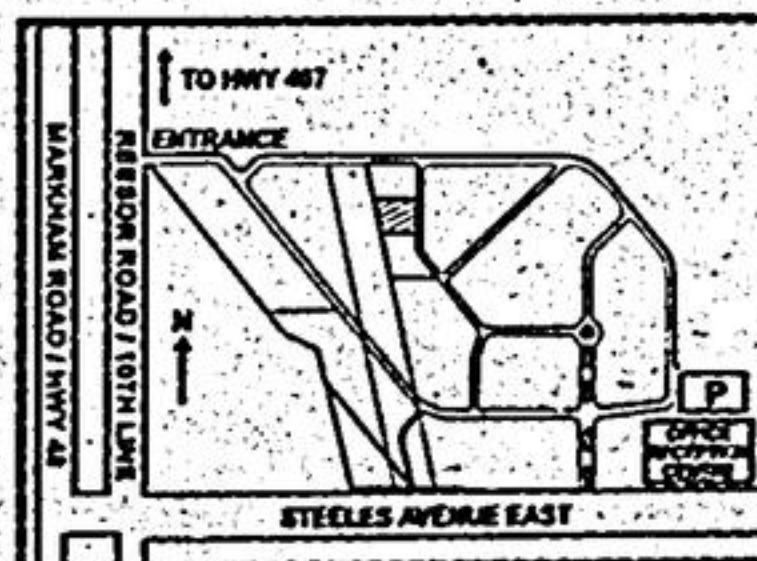
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