

Iowa Methodist Medical Center death blamed on Legionnaires' disease

By TONY LEYS • tleys@dmreg.com • May 11, 2010

Legionnaires' disease bacteria are being blamed for the recent death of one patient and an illness in another at Iowa Methodist Medical Center in Des Moines.

Hospital leaders said they're not sure whether the patients were infected with the bacteria at the hospital, but tests found the germs in the facility's water system. The hospital has installed special filters and flushed the water system with scalding water.

"We're doing everything we can to kill this bacteria and prevent exposure to it, and to keep our patients healthy and safe," hospital spokeswoman Jennifer Perry said.

Legionnaires' disease is a form of pneumonia caused by inhalation of a fairly common type of water-borne bacteria. The disease can be treated with antibiotics, but it can cause deadly illness, especially in people with breathing problems or immune-system weaknesses. Iowa had 21 cases last year and 19 in 2008, with one death each year.

Dr. Mark Purtle, vice president of medical affairs for the hospital's parent company, said no bacteria were found in the room where the patient who died had stayed.

However, germs were found in a few other places at the hospital campus, which includes Blank Children's Hospital. One place they were found was the room where the patient who was sickened had stayed. Purtle said that person has recovered.

The bacteria's presence weren't surprising, he said. "It's found in hospitals and hotels, and even people's homes," he said. Iowa Methodist officials are awaiting test results to see whether bacteria have been forced out of the facility.

The patients' identities weren't released, but Perry said both had suppressed immune systems. She said the hospital is taking special care to safeguard such patients, who include people being treated for cancer or organ transplantation.

State specialists are helping track the source and prevent more infections, Perry said.

Ann Garvey, interim deputy state epidemiologist, said the disease can appear in clusters or sporadic cases.

Iowa Methodist officials have consulted with University of Iowa Hospitals in Iowa City, which had a Legionnaires' disease outbreak several years ago.

The Iowa City hospital had at least seven cases and two deaths among patients, starting in 2004. The hospital spent hundreds of thousands of dollars cleaning and improving its water system, and at one point gave bottled water to people in some parts of the facility.

The family of a former patient and employee of U of I Hospitals, Sandra Shank, sued the facility after she died from the disease in 2006.

Hospital leaders denied responsibility for her death, but state records show the hospital paid \$500,000 to settle the lawsuit last year. A spokesman declined to comment on the settlement.

Legionnaires' disease is named for a large outbreak in 1976 tied to an American Legion convention at a hotel in Philadelphia.