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# Sacred Heart attacks dangerous bacteria in water system

John Stucke The Spokesman-Review

## Transmission

Legionella pneumophila cannot be spread from person to person. Rather, acquiring the bacteria occurs most often by breathing mist or vapor that has high concentrations of the bacteria.

Workers performed a chlorine flush of Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center's water system Tuesday in hopes of killing clusters of bacteria that can cause Legionnaire's disease.

Some patients have gone days without showers and baths and the hospital has served and sold bottled water to staff, patients and visitors after three Sacred Heart patients tested positive for Legionella bacteria this year.

Hospital officials said the water is being treated with chlorine at a level that should kill the bacteria but is low enough that it is safe to drink – 2 parts per million. Chlorinated swimming pools routinely have chlorine measurements between 1 and 3 parts per million.

Two of the three cases this year occurred in January. The patients had been cared for in the same room, though on different days. The third occurrence of the bacteria was in March.

All of the patients were elderly and were hospitalized with multiple illnesses. One of the January patients died, although the cause of death was not listed as pneumonia caused by the Legionella bacteria, said Sacred Heart's chief medical director, Dr. Jeff Collins.

A positive test result from the federal Centers for Disease Control last month prompted the hospital to clean its water system – a major undertaking for the region's largest hospital.

Elaine Couture, the chief executive of Sacred Heart, said last week she anticipated replacing the hot water system in the affected part of the hospital, including the main tower.

Samples of the water will be collected Thursday and tested over the following two weeks to confirm that bacteria have been killed. A fact sheet released by Sacred Heart on Tuesday stated that showering and drinking water restrictions could be lifted by May 20 once tests show the system is free of the Legionella bacteria.

Legionnaire's disease is so named because hundreds of World War II American Legionnaires fell ill with a mysterious, flu-like disease at a convention in Philadelphia in July 1976. More than 30 died of it. Epidemiologists identified the source as the hotel's air-conditioning system.