

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Pathogen lab will close at VA

By Robin Acton
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The Special Pathogens Laboratory at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System, known worldwide for its groundbreaking research in Legionnaires' disease, will close Friday.

When it does, hospitals across the nation might be hard-pressed to find a laboratory to test for the deadly bacteria found in tap water.

"This absolutely will jeopardize lives," Dr. Victor L. Yu, chief of the VA's Infectious Disease Section, said Tuesday. "Outbreaks will be missed; we can't do testing for any more hospitals. We have been given 48 hours."

Dr. Janet Stout, the lab's director, was shocked by the hospital administration's decision.

"It seems to me the VA, either locally or nationally, could have found a better solution," she said.

Yu is a tenured staff member at the University of Pittsburgh. Stout said she was demoted to a "bench technician" in the VA's microbiology laboratory.

Five others lost their jobs July 5 and will lose their health insurance benefits at the end of the month, Yu said.

The lab's closing comes 30 years to the day after the event that gave Legionnaires' disease its name.

A form of bacterial pneumonia, Legionnaires' is best known for a deadly outbreak that killed 34 people and sickened 221 others attending the 58th Pennsylvania American Legion Convention in Philadelphia July 21-24, 1976.

The VA research team is credited with later discovering that water is the source of the disease, developing testing and disinfection methods to prevent it, and finding the right antibiotics to cure it.

People most at risk of contracting the disease are heavy smokers, hospital patients, people with cancer and anyone with a compromised immune system.

The lab's terminated employees have remained on the job as unpaid volunteers to process specimens from the Pittsburgh facility and other hospitals around the nation, Yu said. He said specimens from a VA hospital and a privately owned hospital in the West were tested even though hospital administrators told him not to do so.

"I was explicitly told not to process them, but I had to make a decision. Should I

do what they say or follow my conscience? I decided to process the specimens."

Yu said nearly all tested positive for Legionnaires'.

"If we hadn't done it, these hospitals wouldn't know what they were dealing with," he said.

Yu said hospitals paid a fee for the testing service and the money was deposited in a fund held by the Veterans Research Foundation of Pittsburgh.

"This lab is self-sufficient. It pays for itself," he said.

Michael Moreland, VA director in Pittsburgh and chairman of the board for the fund, referred a call for comment to the communications office yesterday afternoon.

David Cowgill, public and community relations coordinator in that office, said the laboratory's purpose was research, not commercial testing. He said testing for private facilities is not permitted in government buildings.

"There are no contractual agreements in place to give them self-funding," Cowgill said.

In a subsequent e-mailed statement, Cowgill said: "Research functions ... operate as long as they have research funding to support that effort. After careful review, the special pathogens lab was found to have completed its functions."

The statement said the lab was locally managed and "local decisions for its operations are delegated to local management."

Yu said he tried to appeal Moreland's decision but was denied. He turned to state and federal lawmakers for help and faxed a letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C., but as of late yesterday had received no response from the government.

He wants the laboratory to remain open until the VA Central Office in Washington can review the situation.

Cowgill did not discuss specific reasons for the lab's closing. But in a July 5 memo obtained by the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, Dr. Rajiv Jain, chief of staff at the Pittsburgh VA, expressed concern over findings in a recent review of the laboratory's "clinical and research activities, as well as finances."

Jain, who did not detail the findings, indicated that all of the lab's clinical activities would be transferred to the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System clinical laboratory under the supervision of Dr. Dmitriy Gutkin. Water samples of Legionella from the Pittsburgh facility should be submitted to the clinical laboratory.

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