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Pittsburgh lab that researches Legionnaires' Disease closing

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH - A Veterans Affairs lab that has performed valuable research on Legionnaires' disease has been ordered to close on Friday, and a researcher said that will "jeopardize lives."

The Special Pathogens Laboratory at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System has done testing for hospitals around the nation on the disease that took its name from an outbreak 30 years ago this month.

"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, said the VA "either locally or nationally, could have found a better solution."

David Cowgill, a spokesman for the VA, said in an e-mail statement to the Pittsburgh-Tribune-Review that, "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."

He would not discuss specifics of the closing.

Stout said she was demoted to a "bench technician" in the VA's microbiology laboratory. Yu is a tenured staff member at the University of Pittsburgh. Five others lost their jobs July 5, Yu said.

Legionnaires' disease is a respiratory infection caused by bacteria and generally spread through inhalation of mist from contaminated water. It was first recognized in 1976, when 34 people died and 221 became ill during an outbreak at an American Legion convention in Philadelphia.

The VA research team was credited with discovering water as the source, developing testing and disinfection methods, and finding the right antibiotics to cure it.

Five employees fired on July 5 remained as volunteers to process specimens from around the nation, Yu said.

"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," he said.

Nearly all tested positive for the bacteria, he said. "If we hadn't done it, these hospitals wouldn't know what they were dealing with."

Yu said he tried to appeal the closure decision but was denied.

Information from: Tribune-Review, <http://www.triblive.com>