



[Home](#) | [eStore](#) | [Topic Map](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Log In](#)

[Membership](#) » | [Publications](#) » | [Meetings](#) » | [Education](#) » | [Awards & Grants](#) » | [Policy](#) » | [International](#) » | [Academy](#) » | [Media Info](#) »

IN THIS ISSUE

- [Forum](#)
- [Small Things Considered](#)
- [About Microbe Magazine](#)
- [Biomass](#)
- [Program and Deadlines](#)
- [PDF's](#)
- [Employment](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Journal Highlights](#)
- [ASM News](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Current Topics](#)

- [Current Issue](#)
- [Issue Archives](#)
- [Animalcules Archive](#)
- [Author Profile Archive](#)
- [The Microbe Blog](#)
- [ASM Home](#)

Return to [Home](#) : [December 2008](#) : [Current Topics](#)

Uproar Lasts Long after Pittsburgh VA Destroyed Pathogen Collection

Administrators at the Veterans Affairs (VA) Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) in Pittsburgh, Pa., arranged for an estimated 8,000 specimens in the VAPHS Special Pathogens Laboratory to be destroyed abruptly in December 2006—giving rise to acrimony and recriminations that are yet to subside. The collection, developed by microbiologists Victor Yu, Janet Stout, and their collaborators, consisted mainly of *Legionella* and other pneumonia-causing bacterial pathogens, many of them resistant to antibiotics. An outside group of microbiologists and infectious disease experts earlier this year described the destruction of that collection as “an affront to science and scientific study.” Clamor over loss of the collection struck a chord with several members of Congress, particularly Rep. Brad Miller (D-NC), who chairs the Investigation and Oversight subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Science and Technology. Miller not only convened a hearing, “Biobanking: How the Lack of a Coherent Policy Allowed the Veterans Administration to Destroy an Irreplaceable Collection of *Legionella* Samples,” last September, he also had his staff investigate the matter and has pledged to introduce legislation that will safeguard other such collections. Full testimony from the hearing is available at <http://www.legionella.org/vaspl.asp>.

It is an understatement that there are profound disagreements between Yu, Stout, and their immediate collaborators on one side and VA administrators on the other.

“Initially, I was not concerned about the transfer of the collection from the VA,” Stout testified. With the Special Laboratory closed, she and Yu were working at the University of Pittsburgh, where they planned to transfer their collection. “I knew that other VA investigators had left the VA and taken their collections of specimens with them,” she says. Further, several VA administrators assured her that they would “facilitate” that planned transfer. The 8,000 specimens collected between 1979 and 2006 included strains of *Legionella*, staphylococci, *Pseudomonas*, *Klebsiella*, enterococci, streptococci, and *Candida*.

Despite those assurances, however, the collection was not saved. “The attack and destruction of our work is justified with bureaucratic jargon,” Yu says. “Nowhere in the testimony of the VA bureaucrats was there any regret or compunction of the gravity of their offense. In contrast, the Congressmen were easily able to comprehend the fact that the public and the scientists themselves were egregiously harmed.”

The subcommittee report recommends that the President’s Office of Science and Technology Policy “develop a focused policy for biospecimen collection management” and asserts that “Biobanking cannot succeed if its basic policy structure is honored more in the breach than in the observance.”

While destroying the collection irreparably damaged the careers of these microbiologists, Stout and Yu draw specific lessons from their experience that could prove instructive for other microbiologists when called on to protect similarly valuable collections. In other words, some simple steps could help in protecting important biological materials, according to Stout. Thus, she recommends that microbiologists and other researchers (i) keep duplicates of all research, including records from institutional review boards (IRBs) and other research and development (R&D) files; (ii) become familiar with and adhere to rules governing IRBs and with other R&D practices because, even if they are not being strictly observed, they may be invoked later; (iii) check consent forms to ensure that they cover future uses of retained specimens; and (iv) make sure commitments from administrators are in writing, and pester for such assurances whenever necessary.