

## Two patients ill with suspected legionnaire's disease at scandal-hit hospital

Two patients at a hospital severely criticised for its high mortality rates and poor hygiene standards are feared to have contracted life-threatening legionnaire's disease.

By Aislinn Laing

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Both are receiving urgent treatment after falling ill at Basildon University Hospital in Essex and tests are being conducted to confirm their condition.

It comes just days after the hospital announced that a spot-check by health watchdog the Care Quality Commission confirmed it had improved cleanliness standards on its wards.



Basildon University Hospital part of the Basildon and Thurrock Hospitals NHS Trust Photo: PAUL GROVER

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The CQC visit took place a month after it criticised Basildon and Thurrock University Hospitals Foundation Trust for filthy wards, blood-spattered curtains in A&E, inadequate care, and a death rate that was 30 per cent higher than the national average.

The trust has had previous problems with legionella. In 2004, it was fined for failing to control it after a patient fell ill. Weeks later, tests showed the bacteria were still present.

The disease, which causes lung infections and pneumonia, brings symptoms of muscle ache, tiredness, headaches, dry cough and fever.

It is found in water systems such as showers and spas and can be lethal for those who are already ill because their immune systems are weakened.

Basildon hospital is the largest in the county with 777 beds. The two patients were in two separate areas of the hospital - one is critically ill and the other is said to be comfortable and stable.

A spokesman said the hospital had stepped up its already rigorous treatment of its water system to kill the bacteria and was looking for the source of the suspected outbreak. She insisted patients and their families should not be concerned.

"It is our normal clinical practice to test patients with a suspicious respiratory infection for legionella, because we are aware of the risk of the presence of legionella bacteria in the hospital's water system. This means that anyone diagnosed with legionnaire's disease is identified quickly and treated with the appropriate medication promptly," the spokesman said.

Barbara Stuttle, Acting chief executive of NHS South West Essex, said Basildon hospital had considerably improved its record of keeping legionella at bay since 2004.

"Legionella bacterium is widely distributed in the environment and over the past few years Basildon University Hospital has demonstrated commitment and determination in managing and controlling it in the hospital," she said.

"Our own commissioned review of the hospital's practices in June 2009 – carried out by an independent expert – found that Basildon University Hospital was thorough and rigorous in its management of the control of Legionella."

But Katherine Murphy from the Patients' Association said the suspected outbreak showed there was still complacency about patient safety and called for the chief executive Alan Whittle, who has until now escaped sanction for the string of problems on his watch, and his board to be held to account.

"Until someone is held to account for the continued failings at this hospital, patients lives will continue to be at risk," she said.

"It is astonishing that the so-called improvements that we were reassured had been undertaken have been so ineffective. For the hospital to suggest it is not to blame or that people should not be concerned is ridiculous."

She also questioned the validity of the CQC's spot-check.

"The fact that there has been a recent spot-check which found that the trust was meeting the minimum standard for infection control raises serious questions about the CQC's methods and judgement," she said.

A CQC spokesman said the hospital would deal with the problem along with the Health Protection Agency but it would "keep a very close eye" on how it is handled.

"Infections will happen in hospitals – it is all about how they are being managed and prevented," she said. "A spot check is not going to prevent this from happening but we will be watching very closely to see how it's being managed and that they are doing everything they should be."

The agent that causes legionnaires' is a bacterium called legionella pneumophilia and is generally killed using heat and chlorine treatment of the water system. It can affect people of all ages, but it mainly hits those over 50 and more men than women.