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Lawsuits claim 2 got Legionnaires' disease from Oxford hotel

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Two lawsuits filed late last week claim an Oxford hotel hot tub gave two men Legionnaires' disease.

The lawsuits filed in Calhoun County Circuit Court are against Wingate Inns International and Wyndham Worldwide Corp. The allegations stem from a stay in 2008 at the former Wingate Inn in Oxford.

The hotel became the Fairfield Inn and Suites in April. According to the attorney who filed the lawsuits the manager of the Wingate was Manju Purohit. In April, a woman with the same name told The Star she was the owner of Fairfield Inn and Suites.

Attempts to reach Purohit Monday failed. An employee at Fairfield said she was out of the country. Attempts to get a statement from Wyndham Worldwide also failed.

The lawsuits claim that Rodney Handley and Emanuel Howard, both employees of the Jefferson County Commission, used the Wingate hot tub in May 2008. Their attorney, Todd Wheelles, said the men were sent to the area to help clean up after a tornado struck Heflin.

Both men used the hot tub at the same time and later contracted the disease, Wheelles said. Wheelles said they came into contact with Legionella bacteria because it was contained in the mist produced by the hot tub. It must be inhaled to cause an infection, he said.

Both men became gravely ill with the disease and were hospitalized in intensive care units, according to a press release sent by Wheelles.

The attorney said the tub was not properly cleaned.

Jerry Smith, the front desk clerk at the Fairfield Inn and Suites, said the hotel currently does not have a hot tub. Prior to reopening in April the hotel was completely gutted, he said. He did not know if it had a hot tub before the renovations.

According to the Centers for Disease Control each year between 8,000 and 18,000 people in the U.S. are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease. The symptoms are like many other forms of pneumonia. It can cause death in 5 to 30 percent of cases.

"People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) that has been contaminated with the bacteria," the CDC Web site says. "One example might be from breathing in the steam from a whirlpool spa that has not been properly cleaned and disinfected."

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