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Legionnaires' cases prompt precautions

By **BRYON ACKERMAN** and **COURTNEY POTTS**

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UTICA — The installation of new water filters and the testing of rooftop cooling towers are among recent precautions at St. Luke's Healthcare after multiple cases of Legionnaires' disease were seen at its St. Luke's campus.

Hospital officials Friday said they're working with the state Department of Health after three patients were treated in June.

Two of those patients died, and one is known to have contracted the infection after being admitted to the hospital, James Bramley said.

Bramley said both patients who died were elderly and being treated for other conditions at the time. The third patient was released.

"As is often the case, these patients — at least two of them — had multiple serious medical problems and had been hospitalized three times since the first of the year," he said.

One patient who developed symptoms had been at St. Luke's for longer than the typical two- to 10-day incubation period, indicating his or her exposure to the bacteria occurred inside the hospital.

Legionnaires' disease is caused by the Legionella bacteria, and most often presents itself as pneumonia and is spread primarily through drinking water, or aerosolized water, and not person-to-person.

Those with existing lung or immune-system conditions are most susceptible to the infection, but most people are healthy.

State Department of Health spokesman Jeffrey Hammond said the specific source of the Legionella bacteria is still under investigation.

Hospital reacts

Faxton-St. Luke's President and CEO Scott Perra said the hospital is inspecting and testing its air conditioning and other common sources.

A national consulting firm also has been hired to assist in identifying and treating the source.

In the interim, patients and staff have been advised to only drink and brush their teeth with water from approved special antibacterial filters.

Perra said filters were installed Wednesday after state officials asked that a specific plan of action be submitted. The state Department of Health recommended providing bottled water for patients, but officials determined the filter was not the best solution, Perra said.

Filters also have been affixed to shower heads in some wards with higher-risk patients, and nursing management is working on a water problem and the steps that were being taken, he said.

"Other than these modifications to the water system, it's business as usual at Faxton-St. Luke's," Perra said.

Bacteria discovered in 2007

Perra said routine testing previously discovered Legionella bacteria in the hospital's water after renovations were completed in 2007.

The bacteria naturally occur in water and dirt, and Bramley said the hospital has seen several cases come in over the years. Hospitals throughout the state are seeing more cases overall, perhaps due to better screening, he said.

In 2005, the Centers for Disease Control began recommending that a urine test be used to screen for Legionnaires' disease.

"We've been doing that for a number of years now, which is probably why we're seeing more cases than we used to," he said.

Perra said it's important to look at the current incidents in relation to the total number of patients at the hospital. "If you look at the total number of patients admitted to the hospital over the course of three months, he said, making those affected Legionnaires' disease a small percentage of the population.

Hammond said it's possible other locations in the county are being tested as well, but that the hospital is the primary concern.

Testing on drinking water throughout the county showed no cause for concern with the municipal water supply, Hammond said. Executive Director Patrick Becher said Friday.

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