

The World Today with Eleanor Hall

An hour of current affairs background and debate from Australia and the world every Monday to Friday, 12:10 pm, ABC [Local Radio](#) and [Radio National](#).

Jump in Legionnaires disease cases in Victoria

Kellie Lazzaro reported this story on [Tuesday, May 25, 2010 12:50:00](#)

ELEANOR HALL: A jump in Legionnaires disease cases in Victoria has prompted health authorities to issue a warning to businesses about their cooling tower maintenance.

Twice as many cases of the debilitating disease have been reported this year as last and a third of these cases are linked to bacteria from contaminated air conditioning towers.

In Melbourne, Kellie Lazzaro reports.

KELLIE LAZZARO: Legionnaires disease is a potentially fatal form of pneumonia.

The infection of the lungs occurs when someone breaths in water vapour or dust contaminated with Legionella bacteria and people aged over 50, those with chronic medical conditions, and heavy smokers are particularly at risk of severe complications or death.

Thirty-four cases of the disease have been reported to the Victorian Department of Health so far this year - up from 17 for the same time last year.

Victoria's chief health officer Dr John Carnie says there's reason for concern.

JOHN CARNIE: This does happen sometimes from year to year where we get fluctuations in numbers but the increase in cases appears to be related to a strain of Legionella that is normally associated with cooling towers and because of this the department is writing to cooling tower operators across Victoria just reminding them of their obligations in relation to routine maintenance of these towers.

KELLIE LAZZARO: Dr John Carnie says four thousand letters are being sent to businesses and authorities across the state.

JOHN CARNIE: They are expected under the legislation to have risk management plans in place. They're expected to have these plans audited on a regular basis. If you have in a given year a much longer period of warm weather or with the summer and autumn it could be that cooling towers are being used for longer and this may be related to the increase in cases.

Now as we know Legionnaires disease can occur in relation to cooling towers but also in relation to other things like potting mix. Certainly the cases related to potting mix don't appear to have increased from last year.

KELLIE LAZZARO: Ten years ago, more than 100 people were infected with Legionnaires disease from air conditioning systems at the Melbourne Aquarium. Four people died from the infection.

That outbreak prompted the introduction of guidelines for the maintenance of cooling towers in Victoria. Dr Vyt Garnys managed the aquarium case as a technical consultant.

He's now an accredited Legionella auditor and runs a company which performs risk assessments of

buildings. He says while the maintenance guidelines are good, the monthly compliance by building owners may be slipping.

VYT GARNYS: I think some people are becoming a little complacent and you know, when there is ultra low I guess that is a natural reaction. Whether there has been some kickback from the financial crisis where people have perhaps slowed down a little bit on their maintenance processes.

If there has been any pullback, then it may be that people are doing their own risk assessments and not giving the full information to the auditor and of course the auditor is not required. It is probably one of the weaknesses of the Victorian guidelines, is not required to come on site to actually inspect the works. It is a paper audit so it is very dependent on the risk management plan that is handed to the auditor.

ELEANOR HALL: That is Legionella auditor, Dr Vyt Garnys ending that report by Kellie Lazzaro in Melbourne.

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