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Doctor blamed in disposal of Legionella samples

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A U.S. House subcommittee on Monday blamed a high-ranking Veterans Affairs official in Pittsburgh for ordering the destruction of a collection of Legionella samples representing nearly 30 years of medical research.

Dr. Mona Melhem, the associate chief of staff for clinical services at the VA's Pittsburgh Health Service, has been called to Washington to answer questions today in a congressional hearing over her alleged role in the samples' destruction.

Melhem did not return messages left at her office and with her husband.

According to a report from the House Science and Technology Committee's Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee, Melhem told investigators she ordered staff to toss the samples into biohazard containers, which were removed from the Special Pathogens Laboratory in Oakland and disposed of in December 2006.

She said she issued the order because she had "committed" herself by incorrectly stating in an e-mail that the samples had been destroyed, according to the report.

Federal investigators said Melhem told them she had negative views of Dr. Victor Yu, former chief of the VA's Infectious Disease Section, and Dr. Janet Stout, the lab's former director and one of the nation's leading researchers in Legionnaire's disease.

Yu and Stout are scheduled to testify today.

Melhem said she believed Stout "might poison (the VA's) water supply," according to the report.

The report described a "lack of a coherent policy" that led to the loss of the "irreplaceable" samples, and accused Melhem of bypassing procedural guidelines in tossing the samples.

"It is breathtaking that a federal health agency official would order the destruction of a human tissue specimen collection without discussing it with and receiving approval of the agency's research officials," the report states. "It is even more breathtaking that the top officials at the VAPHS and the Veterans Affairs Department have taken no formal action since to make sure that such an

action never occurs again."

Stout discovered in 1981 that water is the source of Legionnaires' disease, a form of bacterial pneumonia responsible for a 1976 outbreak that killed 34 people and sickened 221 others who attended the 58th Pennsylvania American Legion Convention in Philadelphia. A research team headed by Yu and Stout is credited with developing testing and disinfection methods to prevent the disease that strikes thousands each year, and with finding antibiotics to cure it.

The team collected thousands of pathogen samples from the 1970s and stored them for 30 VA hospitals from around the country for safekeeping, Yu said.

Yu and Stout were fired from their jobs, and the lab was shut down six months before the samples were destroyed. At the time, spokesman David Cowgill said the VA determined the research team was conducting unauthorized commercial testing for hospitals outside the VA system.

Yu said yesterday that he and Stout would submit evidence during the congressional hearing showing their research was authorized.

He said he had "no problems" with working with Melhem but that he was stunned by the report. "I'm flabbergasted," he said. "It was like a conspiracy."

Yu estimated 4,000 specimens were lost.

"By doing this, they've hurt the entire VA system and its patients," he said. "What happened was terrible. Much of the things we did affect the entire country and world. They did not consider how this thoughtless destruction would hurt all of mankind."

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