

# 2 patients who died at IU Health had Legionnaires' disease

By Shari Rudavsky, shari.rudavsky@iupui.edu 7:25 p.m. EST February 4, 2014



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Two patients at IU Health University Hospital who were diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease have died, the hospital announced Tuesday.

Legionella pneumonia may have contributed to the death of one patient, said Dr. Douglas Webb, the medical director of infection control for [Indiana University Health \(http://iuhealth.org/\)](http://iuhealth.org/), but the cause of death of the other patient has yet to be determined.

The hospital also said that tests done on its water after the second patient was diagnosed revealed the presence of the bacteria.

IU regularly monitors and treats its water supply to kill the bacteria, Webb said.

It's not known whether both patients were infected in the hospital, Webb said. People are infected by breathing in a mist or vapor containing the bacteria.

It's likely that one of the patients contracted the infection outside the hospital, Webb said.

IU Health workers took additional steps over the weekend to eradicate the potentially deadly bacteria, treating the water with biocide and flushing out the water system, which involves measures such as running all the showers.

Subsequent lab tests have found no additional bacteria, Webb said.

It is rare for hospitals to have the bacteria, and Webb said this is the first time, to his knowledge, that University Hospital has had a positive water culture.

Both patients who died had previous conditions that compromised their immune systems, and both had pneumonia caused by Legionella bacteria, IU Health officials said Tuesday.

No other patients have been diagnosed with Legionella bacteria, he said.

Hospitals have been making efforts to reduce the presence of hospital-acquired infections such as MRSA and clostridium difficile, which kill thousands of patients nationwide each year.

An estimated 8,000 to 18,000 people are hospitalized each year in the U.S. with Legionnaires' disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The disease is treatable with antibiotics.

Legionella bacteria thrive in places with warm water, such as hot tubs and decorative fountains. Most people exposed to the bacteria do not fall ill.

"Even if you visited the hospital or were a patient in the hospital, you have very little chance of being exposed to it," Webb said.

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354. Follow her on Twitter: @srudavsky.

About Legionnaires' disease

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

Legionnaires' disease is caused by Legionella bacteria, usually found in water — especially warm water in places such as hot tubs, hot water tanks and decorative fountains. The key to preventing infection is keeping the bacteria out of water.

Infection occurs when a person breathes in contaminated mist. The bacteria can't spread person-to-person.

The bacteria were named after a 1976 outbreak at an American Legion convention in Philadelphia.

Up to 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease annually in the U.S.

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