

Post-Gazette article spurs Rep. Murphy to ask new CDC head to take another look at Legionnaires' investigation

The new head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told U.S. Rep. Tim Murphy on Tuesday afternoon that she would “look into” why the CDC had to correct a journal article about the Legionnaires’ outbreak at the Veterans Affairs Pittsburgh Healthcare System.

That promise from Brenda Fitzgerald, the former head of the Georgia Department of Public Health who was just appointed to the CDC on July 7, came after Mr. Murphy gave her a copy of the Post-Gazette’s [July 23 article that examined why the CDC](#) corrected the journal article — a rare and embarrassing move for researchers.

“The first thing I did was hand her [the Post-Gazette’s] latest article,” Mr. Murphy said in a phone interview after the meeting. “She told me she’s going to look into this.”

Dr. Fitzgerald told Mr. Murphy she was unfamiliar with the issue, but Mr. Murphy explained that it was an important issue that deserved additional attention.

[Sean D. Hamill](#)

[CDC corrects journal article on Pittsburgh VA Legionnaires' outbreak](#)

The CDC was forced to make a correction to the Clinical Infectious Diseases journal article last month after the Post-Gazette ran a [two-part series in December about the CDC’s investigation and reporting of the outbreak.](#)

The Post-Gazette's stories demonstrated that the CDC's investigators and leaders held biases before they began the 2012 investigation of the Legionnaires' outbreak at the Pittsburgh VA. The outbreak sickened 22 veterans and led to the deaths of six of them. Those biases led to questionable investigation techniques and alteration of data in the journal article from what was originally discovered during the investigation.

“This is a huge breach of science [in an outbreak] that led to deaths,” Mr. Murphy said in an interview Tuesday.

The investigators and leaders openly expressed bias against the copper-silver ionization system that the Pittsburgh VA used to combat Legionella in its water, as well as bias against two former VA researchers who are experts on Legionnaires', Victor Yu and Janet Stout.

The bias was shown through dozens of emails exchanged by CDC officials that were obtained by the Post-Gazette through a Freedom of Information Act Request that took the CDC 3 1/2 years to respond to.

After the December series in the Post-Gazette, [U.S. Bob Casey, D-Pa., called on the CDC](#) to investigate what the Post-Gazette discovered in the emails. [Mr. Murphy joined him in that request.](#)

Both men originally asked the CDC's Office of Inspector General to investigate, as well, but the OIG determined that it was a case of possible scientific misconduct that should be handled by the CDC itself.

The CDC said in an email in recent weeks that that during its investigation — that began under former director Tom Frieden and was completed under his successor, interim director Anne Schuchat — “we reviewed our scientific processes and conclusions from the Pittsburgh VA outbreak. During the review, we did find a small data error in the CID article and the Journal published an errata. This does not change the findings or conclusions and the investigation is closed.”

The CDC on Tuesday did not immediately respond to an email asking what would type of investigation Dr. Fitzgerald meant when she said she would “look into” the case.

But Mr. Murphy said he expects the CDC now to take a new look at what happened with the Pittsburgh VA investigation and the way the findings were reported.

“Now that we have a new CDC head I hope we get further with her than we did” previously, he said.

Sean D. Hamill: shamill@post-gazette.com or 412-263-2579 or Twitter: @SeanDHamill