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Deadly Legionnaires' outbreak spurs care probe

BY DELTHIA RICKS AND CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ

The state health department is investigating separate outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease at two Long Island elder care homes that resulted in three deaths over the past few days, officials said yesterday. Two others remain ill.

Health officials were trying to determine the source of the infections at Sunharbor Manor nursing home in Roslyn Heights and Sunrise Assisted Living in Smithtown. The outbreaks were considered coincidental and unrelated, officials said.

Legionnaires' disease, a form of pneumonia that is often lethal in infirm and elderly people, is caused by bacteria that have an affinity for the lungs. It has been known to contaminate cooling and drinking water systems in hospitals and nursing homes.

Jeffrey Hammond, spokesman for the New York State Department of Health, confirmed that two people contracted the bacterium at Sunharbor Manor and that both died. He said the patients, whose names were not released, succumbed within the past few days.

Dr. David Graham, chief deputy commissioner of the Suffolk County Department of Health, said three people who resided at Sunrise contracted Legionnaires' disease and were hospitalized. He confirmed yesterday that one of those patients died on Saturday or Sunday.

"This was a 90-year-old man who was in renal [kidney] failure," Graham said of the patient, who had to be hospitalized. "He had renal failure, but pneumonia on top of that is additional insult."

Graham said it is not unusual to see a case or two per month of Legionnaires' disease. What piqued his concern, he said, was the clustering of cases in a single facility.

Administrators at Sunrise are cooperating in an investigation being led by the state Health Department, Graham said.

He added that Suffolk had 18 cases last year, most of which were in the most susceptible groups: elderly people or people with compromised immune systems. Hammond said Nassau had 17 cases last year. It was unclear how many were fatal.

A year ago, the state Health Department cautioned administrators of nursing homes and other health care facilities about Legionnaires' and to take measures to prevent it.

The administrator of Sunharbor, which has 266 beds, said in a written statement earlier yesterday that the bacteria was likely cleared.

"The results from the water testing came back all being 'within normal limits,' " said Mel Hitt, nursing home administrator. The facility suspended the use of showers and whirlpool baths, he said.

Sunrise company spokeswoman Meghan Lublin also confirmed the three cases, adding that officials there learned

of two of them late last week.

An environmental cleaning company was summoned to inspect various water sources at Sunrise, including the facility's cooling towers, which are involved in generating hot water. The probe is likely to include other systems, such as air conditioners and humidifiers.

In Sunharbor's parking lot yesterday morning before word of the deaths, visiting family members said they were worried about the disease, but felt Sunharbor officials were handling the situation well.

Marianne Langone, 67, of Roslyn Heights, said she was not planning to move her mother, Anne Bruns, 97, who has lived in Sunharbor for about five years. "They have a handle on it," she said, as she took her mother, who uses wheelchair, for a walk outside. "What can you do? You can't evacuate the whole building."

The 85 residents at Sunrise, most of them women in their 80s, were told in person on Friday of the outbreak, Lublin said.

The facility has been in contact with the county and state health departments and hired an environmental consulting firm, which Lublin said began testing and treating likely sources of the bacteria on Friday, including the water and air conditioning systems.

The results of the tests were not expected until at least the middle of next week. Lublin declined to discuss the residents' conditions and said company policy prohibited releasing information about them.

Ted Hernitche, 48, of Smithtown, said his father is one of the three sick Sunrise residents. Ted Hernitche, 82, who has been living at Sunrise for more than two years, became ill last week. He was taken last Thursday to St. Catherine of Siena Medical Center in Smithtown with a fever of 104 and pneumonia that spread to both lungs. He said doctors there confirmed Tuesday that his father had Legionnaires' disease. His father has stabilized, Hernitche said.

Staff writers Andrew Strickler and Michael Amon contributed to this story.

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