

Legionnaires' cases prompt precautions

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UTICA — The installation of new water filters and the testing of rooftop cooling towers are among recent precautions taken by Faxton-St. Luke's Healthcare after multiple cases of Legionnaires' disease were seen at its St. Luke's campus.

Hospital officials Friday said they're working with the state Department of Health after three patients were treated for the disease between April and late June.

Two of those patients died, and one is known to have contracted the infection after being admitted to the hospital, Infection Prevention Officer Dr. James Bramley said.

Bramley said both patients who died were elderly and being treated for other conditions at the time. The third patient was successfully treated and released.

"As is often the case, these patients — at least two of them — had multiple serious medical problems and had been in and out of the hospital two or three times since the first of the year," he said.

One patient who developed symptoms had been at St. Luke's for longer than the typical two- to 10-day incubation period of the disease, however, indicating his or her exposure to the bacteria occurred inside the hospital.

Legionnaires' disease is caused by the Legionella bacteria, and most often presents itself as pneumonia and a high fever. The bacteria spreads primarily through drinking water, or aerosolized water, and not person-to-person.

Those with existing lung or immune-system conditions are most susceptible to the infection, but most people exposed to it never develop systems.

State Department of Health spokesman Jeffrey Hammond said the specific source of the Legionella bacteria seen in the St. Luke's patients still is under investigation.

Hospital reacts

Faxton-St. Luke's President and CEO Scott Perra said the hospital is inspecting and testing its air conditioning and water systems, since those are two common sources.

A national consulting firm also has been hired to assist in identifying and treating the source.

In the interim, patients and staff have been advised to only drink and brush their teeth with water from approved sinks that have been outfitted with special antibacterial filters.

Perra said filters were installed Wednesday after state officials asked that a specific plan of action be submitted for preventing a possible outbreak. The state Department of Health recommended providing bottled water for patients, but officials determined the filtration system would be more efficient, he said.

Filters also have been affixed to shower heads in some wards with higher-risk patients, and nursing managers at the hospital have been notified of the problem and the steps that were being taken, he said.

"Other than these modifications to the water system, it's business as usual at Faxton-St. Luke's," Perra said.

Bacteria discovered in 2007

Perra said routine testing previously discovered Legionella bacteria in the hospital's water after renovations in December 2007, but it has not been an

issue since.

The bacteria naturally occur in water and dirt, and Bramley said the hospital has seen several cases come in from the community in the last several years. Hospitals throughout the state are seeing more cases overall, perhaps due to better screening, he said.

In 2005, the Centers for Disease Control began recommending that a urine test be used to screen pneumonia patients for the bacteria.

"We've been doing that for a number of years now, which is probably why we're seeing more cases than we used to," Bramley said.

Perra said it's important to look at the current incidents in relation to the total number of patients at the hospital, however. Approximately 3,300 people would have been admitted to the hospital over the course of three months, he said, making those affected less than one-tenth of a percent of the patient population.

Hammond said its possible other locations in the county are being tested as well, but that the hospital is the health department's current focus.

Testing on drinking water throughout the county showed no cause for concern with the municipal water supply, Mohawk Valley Water Authority Executive Director Patrick Becher said Friday.

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