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Cudahy hospital's water wall deemed source of Legionnaires' outbreak

By John Fauber of the Journal Sentinel

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Cudahy — Waterfalls in hospitals may not be good for your health.

After a decorative water wall was identified Wednesday as the source of a Legionnaires' disease outbreak, health officials said hospitals should consider turning off the fountains.

"It's not a healthy combination," said state health officer Seth Foldy.

Aurora St. Luke's South Shore in Cudahy has turned off the water wall in the lobby of its facility after it was identified as the source of the Legionnaires' bacteria that sickened eight people in the last three to four weeks.

Two of those people remain hospitalized in stable, but improving, condition, said Bruce Van Cleave, chief medical officer of Aurora Health Care.

In total, about 4,000 people were contacted after the outbreak. While there have not been any additional cases, Foldy said he would not be surprised to see a few more.

The fountain was turned off March 10. Aurora also has turned off water walls in about five other of its facilities in Wisconsin, including its new hospital in Summit.

The water in the Cudahy center had been drained and cleaned every month. However, Foldy said, it would be reasonable for hospitals around the state to permanently turn off water walls and decorative fountains.

That's because water in the structures can become airborne and get into the lungs of people, including those who may have weakened immune systems.

He said he knew of one other Legionnaires' outbreak in another state that was traced to a hospital water wall.

Foldy and Van Cleave said tiny amounts of Legionnaires' bacteria probably are in most water walls and fountains.

"It's around us all the time," Foldy said, and they are more likely to multiply in fountains and water walls.

The water wall at the South Shore facility was identified as the source because high concentrations of the bacterium were found.

Tests taken at about 10 other sites at the hospital were negative, according to Carol Wantuch, the Cudahy health officer.

Foldy said that while he cannot say for certain that the water wall was the source, he is 99% sure it is.

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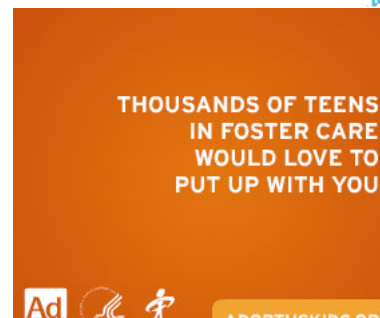
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