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Tourist killed by hotel water

BY JOSE PAGLIERY

jpagliery@MiamiHerald.com

A foreign visitor has died and at least two other people have become sick after staying at a downtown Miami luxury hotel, and health officials are blaming an unusual type of pneumonia called Legionnaire's Disease.

Guests at the Epic Hotel have been relocated upon request to nearby hotels to prevent further contact with the Legionella bacteria in the water, according to the Miami-Dade County Health Department.

An investigation this week by county and state officials revealed that the hotel had installed a water filter powerful enough to remove chlorine from its city-supplied water, a move that encouraged bacterial growth.

"What's ironic is the hotel installed a special filtration system to enhance the quality of their drinking water," said Dr. Vincent Conte, the county's top epidemiologist.

Studies show this type of bacteria is not easily transmitted through simple person-to-person contact because water droplets must enter a person's lungs. Instead, the culprit is typically a building ventilation system or water supply.

The disease kills an estimated 5 to 30 percent of those it infects, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In an unrelated case, the bacteria last week caused the death of a Gainesville-area man, 56-year-old Ryan Sigman, who contracted the disease from the water supply at Shands Cancer Hospital.

In Miami, Conte said there is no cause for widespread alarm because only three cases of the bacteria at the hotel have surfaced in the last two months. That's a tiny fraction of thousands who have come in contact with the hotel's water.

The first patient was a European man who visited the hotel in late September before embarking on a cruise -- only to be rushed back to a local hospital, where he died, according to local health officials. That incident was not previously reported.

A second European man contracted Legionnaire's disease while at the hotel in late November. But county officials said inefficient international communication channels prevented them from discovering that case until this month, when a European woman who visited the hotel was diagnosed with the disease.

Investigators determined the hotel was the source of the disease because it was the only variable all three tourists had in common.

"The hotel is examining and doing everything it needs to do to fix this matter. The hotel is working

as closely as possible with health department," said Bruce Rubin, a hotel spokesman.

Conte said the hotel will adjust its water system so that incoming city water bypasses its special filter. Health officials then plan to temporarily triple the amount of chlorine normally used to stave off bacterial growth.

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