Destruction of Isolates from the Pittsburgh Veterans Affairs Laboratory

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The Pittsburgh Veterans Affairs hospital administration closed the research laboratory directed by Victor Yu and Janet Stout and destroyed isolates collected as part of a series of clinical studies over 25 years. This article discusses the implications and protests such destruction as an affront to science and scientific study. A petition signed by 243 individuals accompanies this article.

The Pittsburgh Veterans Affairs Special Pathogens Laboratory, headed by Victor Yu, MD, and Janet E. Stout, PhD, was terminated by the Pittsburgh VA administration in July 2007, under protest from Dr. Yu. During the administrative dispute, the collection of clinical specimens and microbiological isolates obtained by investigators from around the world were destroyed. These materials were collected as part of numerous prospective observational studies and infection control–related studies. For almost 30 years, Drs. Yu and Stout set the standards for our understanding of the epidemiology of Legionella infection, as well as for our understanding of the control of environmental Legionella infection.

Dr. Yu also established a series of national and international collaborations to elucidate our understanding of the microbiological and clinical management issues of bacteremia due to many different organisms. These studies were seminal in many respects. They changed our understanding of the relationship between appropriate and inappropriate therapy, the relationship between the MICs of isolates and outcome, the molecular epidemiology of relapse and reinfection, and the relatedness of strains throughout the world. The studies are far too numerous to articulate in detail or even to list here in total, but they include studies of the major pathogens that confound us today, including Staphylococcus aureus, Pseudomonas aeruginosa, extended-spectrum β-lactamase–producing Klebsiella pneumoniae, Enterobacter species, Stenotrophomonas maltophilia, Enterococcus species, Bacteroides fragilis, Streptococcus pneumoniae, and Candida species. The concept was simple: observe the clinical presentation of bacteremia or fungemia, and follow outcomes while correlating the microbiology to the outcome. The studies were all prospective, and the isolates were collected and sent to a central laboratory for more-definitive analysis. Each of the studies emanating from this collection has changed our knowledge base and has contributed significantly toward optimal treatment of patients with these infections. Moreover, the careers of a number of prominent academicians were launched when they coordinated these large-scale studies and had the opportunity to analyze the data as trainees.

Capturing the isolates and making sure they were sent to the laboratory was an important and difficult task—especially for fastidious organisms like S. pneumoniae and Bacteroides species. Given the international component, as well as the requirements for sending specimens across national borders, these studies were difficult to perform. All studies were approved in accordance with local institutional review board requirements, and permits were obtained from regulatory authorities. Nevertheless, the number of studies and important insights total >100 peer-review articles (see References [online only] for selected articles) and have provided important information that correlates outcome with the use of certain antibiotic classes, as well as levels of susceptibility. Some of the studies challenged prevailing dogma and helped provide data for the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute.

All of these isolates, many of which were still being studied, were destroyed. The samples were incinerated without warning or notification to Drs. Yu and Stout, such
Among the several thousand Legionella isolates from our VA hospital were among those destroyed.

These Legionella isolates and specimens were being stored for future epidemiologic investigation; providing an invaluable resource for elucidating the source of Legionnaires’ disease at VA Medical Centers. As importantly, emergence of resistance of Legionella to disinfectants has been reported by us and the storage of the original isolates from each hospital allows documentation of this possibility in the event of failure of disinfection. Finally, molecular fingerprinting would allow individual VA hospitals to ascertain the source of the infecting Legionella in VA patients should future outbreaks occur.

Among the isolates in the collection were several thousand well-characterized microorganisms from multinational observational studies. These disease-causing strains of Pseudomonas aeruginosa, Enterobacter species, Enterococcus species, Bacteroides fragilis, Stenotrophomonas maltophilia, Klebsiella species, Candida species and Cryptococcus neoformans were also destroyed.

This unique collection of specimens and isolates were being used to develop new diagnostic tests, new therapies, and to study resistance and mechanisms of disease transmission. The results of these studies benefited veterans nationwide.

To remove the appearance of impropriety, we request that an outside scientific body with no relationship to the VA be convened to ascertain the appropriateness of this action.

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Acknowledgments

Potential conflicts of interest. All authors: no conflicts.
The references are in the online edition of Clinical Infectious Diseases.