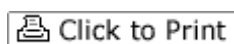




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## House panel knocks VA over destroyed specimens

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers on Tuesday castigated Veterans Administration health officials for ordering the destruction of biomedical specimens on Legionnaires' disease and other infectious diseases that two prominent researchers had collected over a quarter-century.

"Months of investigation by the subcommittee have not revealed any credible reason for destruction of the collection," said Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., chairman of the House Science subcommittee on investigations and oversight. "All of us may pay a price for this conduct, veterans most of all."

A subcommittee report on the Dec. 4, 2006, incident at the VA Pittsburgh Health Service said Congress should consider legislation setting policy on the handling and disposition of biobanks, places where traditional human biospecimens such as blood and tissue are matched to databases with medical records, genomic sequence data and other information.

"It is incomprehensible that there are no policies in place to ban arbitrary and capricious management decisions by administrators without any assessment of the value of the collection and its potential use in other research," the report says.

Dr. Victor Yu, professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh and formerly the chief of infectious diseases at the VA center, told the panel that the destruction of specimens that he and Dr. Janet Stout had collected was "a terrible tragedy."

"From 1979 to 2006, we banked over 8,000 specimens from our studies on Legionnaires' disease and other infections," Stout said. "The specimens included isolates of legionella and thousands of serum, respiratory and urine samples. They were all destroyed."

Yu and Stout were among the pioneers in identifying Legionnaires' disease, a form of pneumonia which first emerged at an American Legion convention in Philadelphia in 1976. They and others discovered the link between the presence of the bacteria in hospital water systems and hospital-acquired Legionnaires' disease.

**LEARN MORE:** [Background on Legionnaire's disease from the CDC](#)

Michael Moreland, who headed the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System at the time, defended actions to close the Special Pathogens Lab where Yu and Stout worked in July, 2006, and then destroy the specimens in December. He said the lab lacked an approved research activity and had evolved into an unauthorized commercial enterprise which tested water supplies for private companies. He said specimens that were not labeled, catalogued or were in open tubes were considered hazardous and were disposed of.

According to the report, the order to destroy the material came after a dispute over how Yu was financing his research that led to the shuttering of his laboratory in July, and his firing for refusing to stop processing samples.

Yu said he could not in good conscience stop processing samples from hospitals and others concerned that their water supplies were contaminated by legionella bacteria. Stout had been placed on administrative leave and faced removal action.


The report said police unlocked the lab on Dec. 4 and five health service employees spent two hours throwing the specimen collection in biohazard containers and turning them over to a contractor for disposal as biohazards.

The destruction came at the same time efforts were underway to transfer the collection to a laboratory at the University of Pittsburgh for use in further research by Yu and Stout.

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