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News

Researchers protest destruction of bacteria collection

Petitioners call for investigation after hospital destroys nearly 10,000 samples.

Heidi Ledford (</news/author/Heidi+Ledford/index.html>)

A group of nearly 250 researchers is requesting an investigation into the destruction of thousands of samples from an infectious disease lab at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The collection — which contained nearly 10,000 specimens — was the product of more than 20 years of work and included many different strains of infectious bacteria, some of them very rare.

“They were priceless,” says David Snyderman, an infectious disease expert at Tufts Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Snyderman had collaborated with the curators of the collection on several projects, and lost samples from patients with pneumococcal meningitis collected from sites around the world. “This is like a book burning,” he says.

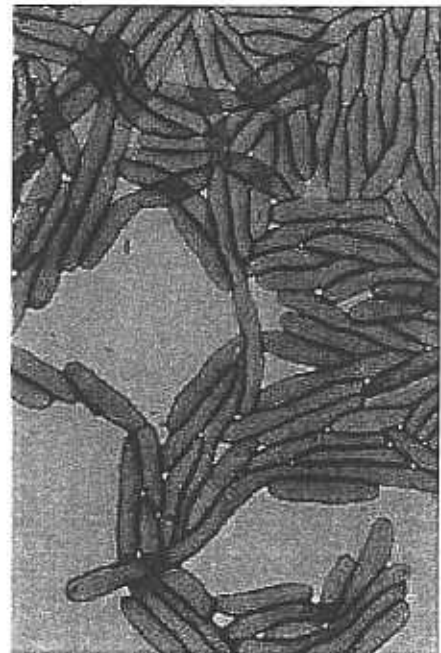
The specimens were destroyed after the medical centre closed down their Special Pathogens Laboratory, headed by Victor Yu, in July of 2006. Yu and colleagues were planning to move the samples to a new home, but the collection was meanwhile destroyed by the hospital as part of the closure.

Snyderman and 242 others have now signed a petition, published in the April issue of *Clinical Infectious Diseases* [1](#)(#B1), asking that an independent review committee investigate what led to the repository’s destruction.

Unknown fever

The lab specialized in testing samples for *Legionella* bacteria, the agent that causes a deadly form of pneumonia called Legionnaire’s disease.

Over the years, it had also become a repository of samples from patients infected with a variety of



Bacterial collections can help to trace the origins of new infectious agents.

BARRY DOWSETT / SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

pathogens. The collection contained samples of an emerging strain of *Klebsiella pneumonia* that was originally discovered in Asia, but has since been found around the globe. And it also held specimens taken from patients diagnosed with 'fever of unknown origin'. These samples could one day have been used to trace the origins of new infectious agents, Yu says.

Yu and his colleague, Janet Stout, have since reopened the Special Pathogens Laboratory at the nearby University of Pittsburgh, but say there is no way to replace the full contents of their archive.

Mystery destruction

Exactly why the hospital chose to destroy the samples remains a mystery. Hospital representatives declined to comment when contacted by *Nature News*, but did tell WTAE, a local television news station, that the hospital incinerated samples that were not clearly labeled to protect the safety of hospital patients and staff.

Stout and Yu chafe at this explanation. Stout says the samples were "meticulously catalogued", though the identity of the infectious agent in some samples was not known. She says she was coordinating with hospital administrators to transfer the samples to the University of Pittsburgh, where she and Yu are now faculty members.

Both researchers say they were not alerted in any way that their samples were in danger. "No one from the administration ever discussed this with Yu or I," says Stout. There were no complaints, she says, that the samples were still in storage at the medical centre. Stout only learned of the destruction when she consulted an attorney to help negotiate the terms under which she would leave the hospital after the lab was closed. She wanted to be sure that she could take her strains with her, and had her attorney contact the hospital's lawyers. "They told him we can't do that because they've already been destroyed," she says. "That's how I found out."

Quick exit

Discussions over whether the lab would be closed culminated in a decision that left Yu only 48 hours to shut down the lab. "On Wednesday they handed the notice to me," says Yu. "On Friday they padlocked the lab."

Yu protested that there were samples in the lab that needed to be tested so that his clients could be told whether their water was contaminated. Yu appealed to hospital administrators and US congressmen for more time. This won him two weeks to finish the lab work, but did not win him any friends in the hospital's administration, he says.

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Yu's colleagues note that he is no stranger to controversy. Yu has clashed with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the past over *Legionella* testing standards. The agency advises hospitals to test their water only after a patient has been diagnosed with Legionnaire's disease; Yu thinks water should be tested once a year to prevent infections before they strike.

Regardless of the cause, the damage is done, says Stout. "What happened to Yu and I is one thing. But the attack on the science is reprehensible," says Stout. "People need to be held accountable so that we can

figure out how this can never happen again.”

References

1. Snyderman, D. R. , Anaissie, E. J. , and Sarosi, G. A. *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 46, 1053-1059 (2008).

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