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## Report criticizes VA's lack of policy

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By Joe Fahy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A new report critical of the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System is expected to lead to a proposal calling for a federal policy on the maintenance and disposal of biomedical sample collections.

The report by the staff of a subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Science and Technology resulted from its investigation of the destruction of a collection of microorganisms and human specimens collected for more than 25 years by Drs. Victor Yu and Janet Stout. In the 1980s, they and other local researchers discovered a link between drinking water supplies, which can harbor Legionella bacteria, and the spread of Legionnaires' disease.

The 32-page report by the Democratic staff of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight was released yesterday. The investigators found that in 2006, after VA Pittsburgh officials decided to close a laboratory that housed the sample collection, a supervisor, Dr. Mona Melhem, ordered the samples destroyed without discussing the action or receiving approval from agency research officials.

"Even more breathtaking," the report found, was that top local and national VA officials "have taken no formal action since to make sure that such an action never happens again."

Based on the report's findings, Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., the subcommittee's chairman, is expected to introduce legislation to establish a policy on proper disposition of biomedical collections across federal agencies and in federally funded programs.

Dr. Stout praised those plans yesterday. She had been working to transfer the collection to a University of Pittsburgh laboratory when it was destroyed. She and Dr. Yu, both Pitt faculty members, now operate an independent lab.

According to the document, troubles for the Special Pathogens Laboratory began in early 2006, when Dr. Yu asked Dr. Melhem, an associate chief of staff, for a raise for Dr. Stout. That request "seems to have sent Dr. Melhem on a path towards closing the lab," the report found.

The report also noted several VA investigations against Dr. Yu, but concluded those efforts raised more questions than provided answers.

Why the VA launched those investigations and closed the lab "is a mystery," Dr. Yu said last night.

Dr. Melhem could not be reached. David Cowgill, a VA Pittsburgh spokesman, declined to comment yesterday, saying he had not seen the report.

Dr. Melhem and other VA officials, along with Drs. Yu and Stout, are scheduled to testify at a subcommittee hearing in Washington today.

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