

VA tossed samples as doctor tried to get them

By Chris Togneri
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U.S. House members on Tuesday admonished Veterans Affairs officials from Pittsburgh for ordering the destruction of thousands of Legionella samples even as a researcher was attempting to save the "irreplaceable" collection.

The destroyed samples represented nearly 30 years of medical research by Dr. Victor Yu, former chief of the VA's Infectious Disease Section, and Dr. Janet Stout, former director of the Special Pathogens Laboratory in Oakland and one of the nation's leading researchers in Legionnaires' disease.

During a congressional hearing held in Washington and carried live on the Internet, VA officials said they destroyed the samples because Yu and Stout did not provide a catalog of their research material after they were abruptly fired in July 2006.

The officials said they tossed the vials six months later, unaware of their research and diagnostic value.

Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., chairman of the House Science and Technology subcommittee on investigations and oversight, was not convinced.

E-mail records show Dr. Mona Melhem, the associate chief of staff for clinical services at the VA's Pittsburgh Health Service, ordered the destruction of the samples shortly after learning that Stout would arrive at the lab the next day to pick them up.

"The most troubling part of this story is that the destruction of this one-of-a-kind collection occurred less than an hour after Dr. Melhem learned that formal steps were being taken, on the following day, to transfer the collection," Miller said.

"All of us may pay a price for this conduct, veterans most of all," he added.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., accused the VA panel of tossing the samples out of jealousy and spite.

"Have any of you had that kind of accomplishment?" he said, raising his voice. "Have you reached that plateau yet in your career? Or is it that you're just looking through the refrigerators of people who are involved in that kind of activity? ... We've got a bureaucratic attitude problem here."

Melhem testified she had no personal problem with Yu or Stout.

She said she shuttered the Oakland laboratory where Stout and Yu worked because it "was not productive and was a drain on clinical resources."

Melhem insisted repeatedly that she did not know the thousands of vials -- each marked with letters and numbers and placed in racks -- were being used for research when she ordered staff to toss them. Melhem said she and staff found "a freezer filled with unidentifiable specimens," some of them stored in "broken or unidentifiable tubes."

Michael Moreland, who headed the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System at the time, said he was unaware of the collection's significance.

Stout discovered in 1981 that water was the source of Legionnaires' disease, a form of bacterial pneumonia responsible for a 1976 outbreak that sickened 221 people who attended the 58th Pennsylvania American Legion Convention in Philadelphia, killing 34 of them.

A research team headed by Yu and Stout is credited with developing testing and disinfection methods to prevent the disease that strikes thousands each year, and with finding antibiotics to cure it.

Yu and Stout testified they could not explain why the lab was closed or the samples destroyed.

"I think the people behind me can answer," Yu said, motioning to the VA officials in the audience.

Miller said he would propose legislation establishing "a core set of policies for the handling, maintenance and disposition of such specimens."

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