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Toxic mold poses hazard

Max Rust - Staff Reporter

While scientists in a laboratory on the East Bank tried to find out the molecular causes of heart failure, they did not know the full extent of risks to their own health.

Surrounded by wet refrigerators, toxinogenic mold and a bucket full of water on a slippery floor, many lab workers wondered if University Facilities Management officials had failed them.



This week a team of civil engineers is trying to locate a water leak in a laboratory in the Variety Club Research Center.

But a cast of workers and officials have been trying to find the leak for almost three years.

Four weeks ago, scientists and laboratory workers evacuated room 277, a molecular biology research lab, in the research center. Water had been dripping from the ceiling into a bucket since 1994, creating health and safety hazards. The leak has also been attributed to the presence of *Stachybotrys*, a toxinogenic mold, in the work area.

Although Facilities Management officials say they have taken a "step-by-step" procedure in fixing the leak, lab scientists and others who work in the lab say the University has dealt with the problem "terribly."

And while Environmental Health and Safety officials say the mold is not necessarily a safety hazard, reports of worker sickness in the lab could indicate otherwise. Workers in the lab agree that their safety may have been placed in jeopardy.

For more than two years, water filtered through the ceiling of room 277 and onto electrical equipment, including refrigerators, freezers and other power supplies used for conducting research on heart failure.

Wenda Carlyle, who used to head the lab, said work requests for fixing the leak had been issued at least once a month without results.

"It was very frustrating, ridiculous," she said. At times when heavy rain came down, water would just "pour in."

"You'd look up and see fluorescent lights sitting in water, which isn't too good," said Dianne Judd, a laboratory scientist.

In October 1994, Facilities Management received the first request to have a hole in the ceiling fixed and

have the leak stopped. Despite sending plumbers, electricians, roof contractors and others to analyze the roof, officials said the source of water is still a mystery.

The following year, Facilities Management put a new roof on the building because of water leakage in several of the building's rooms. All leaks were fixed except the one in room 277.

The private contractor Inspec Inc. was later hired to assess possible roof leaks and concluded that the water was not coming through the roof.

"We've looked at sewer situations; we've looked at domestic water; we've looked at the roof," said Keith Naumann, the shift supervisor for Facilities Management's health sciences zone. "As far as we can tell, it's not coming from those locations."

On July 15 of this year, a custodian notified a union steward to inform him of problems in the lab. The steward then contacted the University Department of Environmental Health and Safety to assess the situation.

It was not until this time that any health inspector had seen the room.

"Calling the physical plant did not generate repair," Judd said. "But the janitor calling the union steward got immediate response."

Two days later, Dawn Errede, a chemical hygiene specialist in the Department of Environmental Health and Safety, looked at the leak. She took mold samples of the ceiling tile and the metal duct above the ceiling.

In addition to yeast and Acremonium mold, common organisms found on wet surfaces, Errede located Stachybotrys, a mold which contains mycotoxins. Mycotoxins can create health ailments including upper respiratory problems and flu symptoms for people exposed to high levels of the fungus.

Errede said she was "surprised" to find the mold on the metal duct, which indicated that it must be coming from somewhere near the water source. Stachybotrys requires both cellulose, an organic material, and water to grow.

On July 22, Errede sent a letter to Judd stating that the water dripping onto electrical equipment and the floor posed "fire, electrocution and slip-and-fall hazards for the occupants in the area."

Soon after, Errede sent a letter to Facilities Management's Naumann, stating that the leak must be stopped as soon as possible. The letter, which also revealed the mold findings, said that stopping the leak is necessary in order to decontaminate the lab.

However, Errede said, the mold was not of paramount concern.

"It's not an immediate health risk, but it's not something to let go for awhile," she said.

Andrew Streifel, a hospital environment specialist in the Department of Environmental Health and Safety, said Stachybotrys is actually somewhat common.

In addition to the Variety Club Research Center, Streifel mentioned that Stachybotrys has previously been located in Coffey Hall and the Mayo Memorial Building.

The mold is sticky and the toxic spores do not easily spread through the air like other molds, Streifel said. The only way for it to spread is if the surface area is agitated.

Leaking water can also carry the mold into the atmosphere.

Stachybotrys was linked to the sickening of 21 infants in the Cleveland area between the years of 1992 and 1994. Three of the children died, however sickness among adults was not reported.

Last October, 75 employees were moved out of the Minneapolis Red Cross Headquarters after Stachybotrys was found and some workers reported illness.

This August, about three weeks after the initial testing, Errede took air samples in the laboratory looking for live Stachybotrys and did not find any. However, lab workers remained concerned because even dead Stachybotrys spores are still toxic.

Although sickness in the lab has not been attributed directly to Stachybotrys, an indoor air quality complaint form sent by Judd to Facilities Management on Aug. 11 stated that "significant respiratory problems were especially noted during the spring during the snow melt and continual ceiling leak."

"I had headaches and dizzy spells, but they seem to have stopped since I stopped working in the lab," said Doug Hayden, a custodian in the Variety Club Research Center. Although Hayden does not work in room 277 now, he used to clean areas around the lab and empty the trash.

Carlyle, the former lab director, said that while she was working in room 277, everyone had missed some work due to respiratory problems.

Officials in the Department of Environmental Health and Safety maintain that levels of mold in room 277 are not high enough to warrant an immediate relocation of the lab. But Errede said the electrocution and slip-and-fall hazards were "something no one should have to go through."

Naumann said he was not informed about the safety hazards until he received a copy of Errede's letter, and therefore did not initiate lab-worker relocation.

He called the leak a "persistent, irritating, constant drip in the ceiling that could be caught by a waste bucket and maintain the safety standard" of the lab. But then when he learned about the hazards, the priority "escalated."

However, Judd said the lab did not begin to relocate until the very beginning of September, operating in the meantime with wet electrical equipment in the room and Stachybotrys in the ceiling.

"I think if there's a safety and health hazard, there has to be a mechanism for repairing things on a more immediate basis," she said

As part of this week's civil engineer survey, workers will be looking at a possible water infiltration through the side of the building which rests below Church Street.

Jerry Kane, an operations supervisor for Facilities Management, explained that heavy rains flood Church Street and soak into the back wall of the research center. He said this might be the source of the leak.

Still, some say that the wait has been too long.

"This problem could've been alleviated two years ago if they'd gotten rid of the leak," said Patricia Symbal, a laboratory custodian. "If somebody had been electrocuted, the University would've been sued."

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