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A Sad and Preventable Story

By Michael G. Ivanovich



If you haven't yet gotten the word that chronic water problems can lead to the growth of mold, and that mold is not a good thing to have in buildings because it can make people sick, then consider yourself warned.

A recent out-of-court settlement for an IAQ-related infant death is cause for concern among building owners and professionals.

Physicians believe that eight-month old Amber Patterson died of pulmonary hemosiderosis (bleeding lungs) after being exposed to *Stachybotrys atra* (*S. atra*), a black, slimy mold.* Paper-backed drywall, saturated by water from a chronically leaking pipe, provided growing conditions for the mold. The spores of *S. atra* contain a mycotoxin that is unhealthy for animals and people. Exposure occurs when the spores are inhaled. Amber's parents originally sought \$10 million from Independent Management Services of Cleveland but settled for \$175,000 the day before the case was to go to trial.

Amber was one of 21 children diagnosed with PH between 1993 and 1996, and one of three whom have died. An epidemiological study of the first 10 cases is reported in the Centers for Disease Control publication, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, January 17, 1997. A Website managed by the General Clinical Research Center <http://gcrc.meds.cwru.edu/stachy/> has more information and links to a detailed paper that appeared in *Pediatrics*, January 1997, describing the Cleveland outbreak.

It has not been scientifically proven (95 percent certainty) that *S. atra* causes the type of health effects implicated in Amber's death. However, Dorr Dearborn, PhD, MD, Pediatric Pulmonary Div., Case Western Reserve University, School of Medicine, informed me that the epidemiological evidence shows that they are with 90

percent certainty. It turns out that *S. atra* exposure is difficult to diagnose because it leaves no traces of itself in the tissue that it has damaged.

Amber's case has many lessons, many of which *Heating/Piping/Air Conditioning* has imparted time and time again. Buildings should be designed to keep unwanted moisture out. Where water damage is nonetheless sustained, the causes have to be fixed, and the damage repaired. Additionally, if mold subsequently grows, it has to be removed, along with the materials it colonized, if necessary. If an IAQ problem is suspected or reported, it has to be dealt with immediately using procedures involving open communication and well-coordinated internal and, if necessary, external resources. Hospitals, senior care centers, and other facilities where occupants are particularly sensitive to IAQ problems must be designed, constructed, commissioned, operated, and maintained with extra care.

However, I caution that *S. atra* is not a cause for media hysteria. It should not be paraded through publications as a baby killer. *S. atra* is neither the only mold nor the only black mold that grows in cellulose materials when they become saturated or chronically wet. Keeping moisture under control will control mold, including *S. atra*.

**Reference: August 8, 1998, The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

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