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Tuesday, February 24, 2004

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Legionnaires mystery studied in OC

Four former Princess Royale guests develop disease; water tests show no positive link to hotel

By James Fisher
Daily Times Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY -- The Princess Royale hotel is "going overboard" to head off a possible public health problem, its general manager said Monday, after health officials started testing its water for Legionnaires' disease.

The Worcester County Health Department said four people who stayed at the 91st Street hotel in recent months have been diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease. The infection is transmitted by breathing in vapor or steam with too much Legionella, a common bacteria.

However, the first tests of water from the hotel, taken in early February, showed no danger to guests. Results from water samples taken last Wednesday are expected Friday or early next week.

"There is not a definite link to the Princess Royale," said Deborah Goeller, the county's health officer. "The last set of water samples that have been done have all been negative."

But she said the health department has found no other link among the four people besides their hotel stays at the Princess Royale in Ocean City.

"We have already looked at every other common factor we could think of," Goeller said. "That begins to raise a certain level of concern."

Robert Bendix, 74, of Salisbury said his wife showed symptoms of the disease after spending several days and nights at the hotel in late January at a Disabled American Veterans conference.

Doctors at Peninsula Regional Medical Center diagnosed Nancy Bendix, 59, with Legionnaires, he said, and she was hospitalized for 17 days.

On Jan. 29, "she got up and she was totally incoherent," he said. "The 17th or 18th (of February) was the first day she recognized me."

Bendix said he believes he avoided the disease because he didn't attend much of the conference's daytime events. His wife is diabetic, he said, which is a risk factor for Legionnaires, and she took several hot showers in a room without an exhaust fan.

Since Saturday, county health workers have been stationed at the hotel, answering guests'

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The hotel notice states people at high risk for the bacteria -- the elderly, smokers, diabetics and people with weak immune systems -- "may wish to consider temporarily relocating to another hotel."

Jon Tremellen, the hotel's general manager, said he was taking more precautions than legally required out of concern for guests' health.

"We're acting like we have something, even though we probably don't," he said. "We're going to go overboard."

Tremellen said hot water tanks and boilers had been scrubbed clean over the weekend, and pipes were being superheated above 150 degrees.

He estimated 54,000 people had used the hotel in the past five months who have not become sick.

Goeller said three of the victims live in Maryland and one lives in Delaware. While she suspects something in the hotel is causing the illnesses, she said no one is certain of it yet.

"There are thousands of people who have stayed there and not gotten sick. That's why we're being so careful," she said.

News of the tests made David Hush, a Baltimore radiologist, anxious about his upcoming trip to Ocean City. Hush said he and his girlfriend have reservations at the hotel in two weeks.

"We were just planning to relax, go swimming, relax in the hot tub," he said, noting that the hotel is recommending that people worried about the disease stay out of hot tubs.

Now, Hush said he wasn't sure if the trip was still on unless health officials pronounce the Princess Royale clean.

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Originally published Tuesday, February 24, 2004

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