

Legionella bacterium: it deserves respect

Andrew Mills, Chair of the Guernsey Occupational Safety and Health Association (GOSHA), looks at the risks of the legionella bacterium and the responsibilities of building owners.



The legionella bacterium is something most of us have heard of, yet relatively few know much about. It is in all the water we use but, thankfully, in such small quantities, it does us no harm.

Yet, if it is allowed to build and multiply, droplets of water containing bacteria can be inhaled and can cause serious harm and death, particularly to:

- people over 45 years of age;
- people suffering from chronic respiratory or kidney disease, diabetes, lung and heart disease;
- anyone with an impaired immune system;
- smokers and heavy drinkers.

Its name comes from the first published public incident in 1976, where a group of military veterans (legionnaires) met in a US hotel and a number (182) became seriously ill and 29 died from the effects of the legionella bacterium.

While the bacterium is generally harmless to us in the water we use, it can multiply to a dangerous extent in still water between a temperature range of 20 degrees centigrade and 50 degrees centigrade. That may include many water tanks, spa pools and much pipework in Guernsey, especially those water systems which are not regularly used or are still for long periods.

We are fortunate that the States of Guernsey recognises the potential dangers and manages the bacterium proactively in public property, especially in our hospital, leisure centre and in our schools.

Management of the bacterium requires a proactive, knowledgeable and ongoing approach, implemented by suitably trained staff, to ensure it is not a danger.

We have few Approved Codes of Practice (ACoP) in Guernsey – guidance which must be implemented to fulfil the requirements of our health and safety law – but we do have one for legionella. It details control measures which must be implemented.

You can find a copy of the ACoP and some very helpful guidance at www.gov.gg/legionella. Here is some of it:

The ACoP requires ‘those in control of buildings with its cooling towers and water systems (property owner / facilities manager / building occupiers) to adopt suitable means to control legionella in their premises. Therefore, water systems within the workplace must not pose a risk to health so far as is reasonably practicable.’

Hazards can especially arise from cooling towers (many associated with air conditioning), showers, taps, jacuzzis, whirlpool spas and water tanks. In particular, unoccupied buildings can be especially hazardous.

The initial symptoms of legionnaires’ disease are similar to those of flu, including high temperatures, fevers and chills; coughs; muscle pains; and headaches. It can then lead on to more serious symptoms such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and signs of mental confusion. Luckily, the disease is not known to spread from person to person.

Businesses, charities and other organisations in Guernsey must follow the provisions of the Guernsey ACoP and the guidance given by our Health & Safety Executive. It is part of our law. If you are unsure as to what is required or what is needed, ask an expert to help you. It could save you a lot of hassle and it could save somebody’s life.

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