Employee infected while working at Winnipeg disease lab had virtually no safety training: report

A worker and supervisor at Canada's world-renowned disease lab in Winnipeg had virtually no safety training before the employee was infected with one of the diseases he handled, says a damning investigation into the incident.

Obtained by the National Post under access to information legislation, it was one of several reports the Public Health Agency of Canada prepared over the last few years on a rare but striking occurrence: researchers sickened by the infectious diseases they experiment on or test.

The contaminated technician recovered within a week; what seemed more significant were the shortcomings uncovered by the investigation, including a lack of any formal or mandatory safety instruction in the lab.

"The supervisor had never attended (bio-safety cabinet) training, biological and chemical spill training or general laboratory safety training," said the agency review.

There wasn't enough time to both train and complete other tasks

"The supervisor said that there wasn't enough time to both train and complete other tasks."
The organization’s national microbiology lab deals with some of the world’s most lethal pathogens, and has won kudos for developing a vaccine and drug treatment for Ebola virus.

The contamination accident, however, occurred in the disease lab’s level-two containment section, which works with less virulent bugs like E. coli and salmonella. Ebola research takes place in level-four labs.

The incident, never publicly reported, occurred in 2012 and several corrective measures have been taken since, said Sylvia Krzysztan, a Public Health Agency spokeswoman.

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Those include a formal training program for the whole microbiology lab, appointment of a training co-ordinator to oversee safety education and regular audits to “monitor adherence to improved practices,” she said in an email response to questions.

“The health and safety of our employees is a top priority,” said Krzysztan. “There have been no laboratory acquired infections since that time.”

Reports obtained from the agency on such incidents – at both government and outside labs – offer a unique picture of what is surely the greatest fear of workers who toil daily with nasty diseases. But the documents suggest the accidents – at labs that test samples to help diagnose patients and that do research – occur relatively seldom.

The 54 facilities that responded anonymously to an agency survey last year reported 46 laboratory-acquired infections over the previous five years, one report said.

A more detailed review concerned what seemed to be another agency employee who was sickened by E. coli. The investigation discovered that workers routinely handled vials containing the bacteria without gloves, and without disinfecting the containers.

A worker at the federal Agriculture Department’s Lethbridge Research Centre was infected with the Campylobacter jejuni bacteria, but his supervisor did not report it to safety authorities until last year — a decade after it occurred.

Symptoms of the infection — which can cause diarrhea, vomiting and sometimes more serious effects — were still ongoing and being treated, the 2014 report said, without elaboration. The person likely inhaled freeze-dried particles of bacterial cultural released from a fractured container, said the document.

The report on the 2012 case said the employee had not been made aware of the potential hazards of a new task. The person was asked to work with a biosafety cabinet — a sealed-in work area designed to prevent infectious material from escaping — but had no guidance on how to use it.

Even the employee’s manager sometimes failed to wear gloves while working with diseases, and had no record of any “job-specific” training, the report said.

“The supervisor did not demonstrate good safety procedure in the laboratory.”

That manager completed the required training immediately after the incident, said Krzysztan.

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By Tom Blackwell

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