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Water cooler legionella case may be world first

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CHRISTCHURCH - Legionella bacteria detected in a Christchurch Hospital office-type water cooler filter may be the first case of its type in the world, health officials say.

They are warning businesses to check office water cooler filters after the find.

Testing was done at the hospital last October after a patient showed symptoms of legionnaires disease and one of 14 office-style water coolers was found to have a "significant level" of legionella bacteria in a filter.

Canterbury District Health Board spokeswoman Michele Hider told NZPA the bacteria found in the water filter was different to the type that had affected the female patient and the testing had been done as a precaution.

She said there was no evidence to suggest the water cooler was linked to any hospital patients or visitors becoming unwell.

The cooler, which had a filter that had some months to go before its expiry date, was removed from the hospital as soon as the test results were confirmed.

Canterbury medical officer of health Mel Brieseman said office water coolers and drinking water filters were not usually checked for legionella because the disease was generally contracted through aerosol spray.

"We believe this is the first case of significant levels of legionella being detected in a drinking water cooler anywhere in the world, so we will be publishing the findings as a scientific curiosity," he said.

Dr Brieseman warned that water filters needed to be changed regularly to prevent a build-up of a variety of bacteria, including legionella.

It was "standard advice" for people to use masks and gloves when handling potting mix to prevent legionellosis.

Water Cooler and Legionella

Small amounts of legionella occurred naturally in all untreated water supplies but could multiply to potentially harmful levels in the right conditions.

However, Dr Brieseman said the risk of ill health from drinking water containing significant amounts of legionella was considered low, compared with inhaling the bacteria as mist or steam.