

RUTLAND COUNTY

Cortina Inn closed after tests show Legionnaires' disease

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By *Brent Curtis Herald Staff* MENDON — The 96-room Cortina Inn on Route 4 has been shut down by state health officials who said a confirmed case of Legionnaires' disease was traced back to the hotel.

State Health Department officials ordered the hotel closed Thursday morning after test results of the hotel's water found concentrations of the bacteria *Legionella pneumophila*, which is responsible for the pneumonia-like symptoms of the disease.

"We asked that the guests be vacated and that employees not continue to work there until we could clean and retest the water system," state epidemiologist Dr. Cort Lohff said Thursday afternoon.

By mid-afternoon, the sprawling hotel, which contains conference and banquet rooms, two restaurants, a spa and fitness center, and employs 75 full- and part-time workers, was almost empty.

By 3:30 p.m., the parking lot was nearly empty, with only a half dozen vehicles still there.

A man who attempted to check in for a conference was surprised when the remaining staff turned him away.

"I just got here and they told me they had to close," said the man, while loading his car.

A woman at the front desk said the hotel was closed but declined further comment. She said no one on the hotel's premises was authorized to discuss the matter.

She did say that guests were being referred to other hotels. She also said that as far as she knew the shutdown was only temporary.

How temporary was a question that Lohff said he couldn't answer Thursday, although he said he believed the hotel would be closed for several days at least while the water system was cleaned and flushed with chlorine.

Lohff said health officials were led to the hotel after a trio of Legionnaires' cases led back to the Cortina.

The first diagnosis was made six months ago when a man who stayed at the hotel became ill, but health officials couldn't pinpoint where the man contracted the disease, Lohff said. A second confirmed case in January also had connections to the Cortina, but Lohff said the evidence in that case was also not "overwhelming."

When a third case was diagnosed in mid-March and a connection to the Cortina was established, Lohff said health officials had the proof they needed to test the water system.

The naturally occurring bacteria has actually been found at the Cortina in the past when two people who used a whirlpool bath at the hotel were diagnosed with the disease in 1985.

Health officials didn't close the hotel down in that instance, but the whirlpool was taken offline until it could be cleaned, according to Robert Harnish, who owned the inn at that time.

"We had to put in a new disinfectant system with new guidelines and rules for how to care for (the whirlpool)," Harnish said. "We tested the water three times a day after that."

Lohff said Thursday that state officials would require the Cortina's owners to adopt new maintenance procedures to prevent the bacteria from returning once the system was cleaned. He also said the Health Department will regularly test the hotel's water system after the facility reopens.

The Health Department isn't the only state agency that has had concerns about the hotel's water supply.

Last summer, the state Department of Environmental Conservation issued a boil water notice at the Cortina after higher than acceptable levels of E. coli bacteria was found during tests.

In a boil water notice issued by the DEC, state officials said the hotel had been ordered to replace a storage tank vent screen and "shock" the storage tank with chlorine.

Lohff said he didn't know whether the hotel faced any penalties in connection with the Legionnaires' outbreak.

He said his department is searching for other people who stayed or work at the inn who have come down with the fever, coughing and chills that are symptomatic of the disease. The disease can be treated with antibiotics but can prove fatal, according to the state Department of Health Web site.

Anyone who believes their stay or visit to the inn made them sick is asked to call state health officials at 863-7240.

Cortina officials and owners could not be reached on Thursday.

Contact Brent Curtis at brent.curtis@rutlandherald.com