

Legionnaires' deaths hotel fined

A four-star hotel near Cardiff has been fined £40,000 after two guests died from Legionnaires' disease.

Cardiff Crown Court heard how seven guests became ill after eating from a buffet at the Copthorne Hotel between July 1999 and February 2000.

Businessman Phillip Roberts, 59, of Cross Keys, south Wales, and nurse Linda Johnson, 52, of Barry, died.

The hotel admitted health and safety charges. As well as the fine, it was ordered to pay £15,000 costs.

Fine mist

The court heard that the Legionnaires' outbreak at the hotel, in Culverhouse Cross on the outskirts of Cardiff, originated in an incorrectly-installed humidifier in a buffet unit.

The unit sprayed a fine mist over food to keep it looking fresh, but instead infected the hotel dining room with the disease.

The seriousness of this case was the absence of any reasonable steps to be aware of the risk of Legionnaires' disease

Judge Christopher Pitchford

The buffet unit was supplied by Lancashire-based Link Unit Engineering.

Link Unit managing director Kevin Kempen, 48, of Southport, Merseyside, admitted failure to educate himself on the procedures for avoiding Legionnaires' Disease in court.

He was fined £7,500 with £2,500 costs.

Hotel health and safety consultant Christopher Purslow, 60, of Weston-super-Mare, Somerset, admitted health and safety charges. He was fined £4,000 with £1,000 costs.

Prosecutor Stephen Linehan told the court: "The bacteria occurred because humidifiers in the unit were installed without the safety features being used.

"Each of the victims had passed through the hotel's dining room where it was kept - they were all exposed to air droplets containing the bacteria."

Judge Christopher Pitchford said: "The seriousness of this case was the absence of any reasonable steps to be aware of the risk of Legionnaires' disease.

"The equipment was perfectly safe if properly installed. But the installers never properly spelled out the risks."

Mr Roberts, of Cross Keys and Mrs Johnson, of Barry, died after visiting the hotel at separate times.

Mrs Johnson was at the hotel in December 1999 for a Christmas meal with colleagues.

She fell ill and died on Boxing Day.

Mr Roberts died the following February after visiting the hotel on 30 January.

Another five guests contracted the disease between July 1999 and February 2000 but survived.

Following the case, the families of the two who died criticised the level of the fines.

'Extreme dissatisfaction'

Mr Roberts' widow, Irene, said: "I'm not satisfied with the outcome of the case and would like to ask for a public inquiry into the way the environmental health department acted over the outbreak at the hotel.

"The Copthorne Hotel should have been closed after the first case and my husband would not have died."

The family of Linda Johnson said in a statement: "We would like to express our extreme dissatisfaction that this case has taken six years to achieve what can only be called a miscarriage of justice.

"Overall it appears that no individual or company showed the appropriate duty of care."

Legionnaires' disease is a form of pneumonia. It takes its name from the first known outbreak which occurred in a hotel that was hosting a convention of the Pennsylvania Department of the American Legion in 1976.

It is most often contracted by inhaling mist from water sources such as showers and cooling towers which are contaminated with Legionella pneumophila bacteria.

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