

## Pittsburgh VA joins organization to fight Legionnaires'

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By Sean D. Hamill / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The chief of staff for the Veterans Affairs Pittsburgh Healthcare System didn't intend his remark Tuesday to be historically ironic.

During a briefing on what the Pittsburgh VA has done in response to a Legionnaires' outbreak it revealed last year, Ali Sonel told reporters that a new organization the Pittsburgh VA helped create was intended to make the Pittsburgh VA "a national and international leader in [Legionnaire's research] and be a resource for other facilities."

But more than a few people saw the irony in that statement.

"I think we were" leaders in research and a resource for other facilities, said Victor Yu, an internationally known Legionnaires' expert who worked at the Pittsburgh VA for 28 years until 2005 when he was fired and the laboratory in which he and his colleague, Janet Stout, had made multiple Legionnaires' discoveries over the years, was closed in a controversial, cost-saving move.

Tuesday's briefing to reporters was part of a media push the Pittsburgh VA has been pursuing for two months to show patients and the community that it is doing everything it can to find out not only what happened that led to the outbreak, but to prevent one from occurring again.

Part of that push included an open house for Congressional members or staff from the area earlier Tuesday.

After hearing presentations from Pittsburgh VA leaders, U.S. Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Upper St. Clair, said: "I'm still not sure we have the accountability and responsibility here yet."

"At this point, I think they're moving in the right direction," he said. "But I'm not going to turn away on this."

People both inside and outside the Pittsburgh VA believe the closure of Dr. Yu and Dr. Stout's lab, and Dr. Yu's firing and Dr. Stout's resignation, led to the Legionnaires' outbreak that occurred in 2011 and 2012 that killed at least five veterans and sickened another 17 others here.

Neither Dr. Sonel nor any other current member of the Pittsburgh VA leadership, however, has ever conceded that point.

Asked Tuesday if the Pittsburgh VA would have been better off, in retrospect, to have kept Dr. Yu and Dr. Stout on staff and their lab open, Dr. Sonel would not answer yes or no, saying: "I would be speculating."

Dr. Yu said Dr. Sonel's comments show his "ignorance" because it is easy to see the impact of the work he and Dr. Stout have made from the 14 journal articles they've published since they left the Pittsburgh VA, and the dozens more they published when they were VA employees.

"And all these publications had influence, not only here, but in Europe and now in Asia," Dr. Yu, who now runs a private lab in Pittsburgh with Dr. Stout, said in a telephone interview.

The organization the Pittsburgh VA recently formed, which Dr. Sonel said would be called the Pittsburgh Community Legionella Partnership, is a joint organization with the Allegheny County Health Department, the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Jewish Healthcare Foundation.

Sean D. Hamill: [shamill@post-gazette.com](mailto:shamill@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-2579.

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