

The newspaper of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church www.bwconf.org

UMConnection

APRIL 2, 2003

On-line

VOL. 14, NO. 7

Conference battles mold ailments

By Tom McAnally Special to the UMConnection

For Baltimore-Washington Conference staff, there's fungus among us and it's no joke.

"We have been very sick," reports Martha Knight, associate financial officer who is responsible for managing the conference center near downtown Columbia.

"I know it is hard for people to understand that such a little thing as mold can make you sick, but I'm here to tell you it can."

As her symptoms grew worse in 2002, Knight said she was feeling numbness in the ends of her fingers. She and others have experienced a wide range of symptoms, such as tingling in their feet and legs, all-over body aches and



Linda Worthington/UMConnection
Dr. Richie Shoemaker, right, administers a visual contrast test to the Rev. Willie Caraballo-Lopez to determine his susceptibility to the effects of the mold exposure.

breathing problems.



Shockley

The Rev. Louis Shockley's office was the epicenter of the mold outbreak. He suffered eye irritations and massive headaches for up to two years, but visits to several doctors — including tests and medications — failed to yield a diagnosis or a remedy.

“I had been complaining about a variety of illnesses,” said Shockley, superintendent of the Baltimore West District. “I had problems with feet swelling and legs swelling, and eventually, very difficult neurological problems that nobody seemed to be able to pinpoint.”

At that point, testing began around the building, Shockley said, because other people started to complain. A long drought and heavy November rains led to the discovery of structural problems in his area.

“When they (inspectors) got to my office, they suddenly threw me out, and determined that the damage in the building had actually started in my office. Much of what was going on with me...was probably related to this.”

Shockley, at times, could barely move or control his body. “There were times in public when I would have to shut down because I couldn't get out of the chair,” he said. “Several times, I've been driving a car and had to pull off (the road) for three or four hours at a time. It was really becoming a major problem for me.”

Shockley was told to check and see if his health problems were related to the building problems.

By the time he visited a toxicologist, he was told he had lost one-fourth of his cognitive abilities and a fourth of his nerve tendons. “So, they started pumping the shots in my

system,” he said, “and almost within three weeks after that, I started feeling much better.”

A growing field of medical and scientific research shows that chronic human illness can be caused by exposure to molecules produced by living organisms known as biotoxins. Many biotoxins are neurotoxins that adversely affect multiple organs including neurological function.

At least 45 of the 55 conference employees have been ill, according to Knight. When toxic mold was found in the conference building, at 9720 Patuxent Woods Drive, the building was immediately closed for cleaning. When that proved unsuccessful, the entire staff was quickly relocated to temporary space in several locations, including local churches, while some worked from home.



Knight



Martha Knight

The white substance under the window ledge is reportedly a strain of mold that caused physical and neurological damage in many conference employees.

members were able to

come together again in a building across the parking lot from the sick building.

Being in one location is a real plus for both morale and productivity, she explained. “We are a dedicated staff and we want to do a good job. Being scattered made it hard.” A few staff who were most affected by the mold continue to work from their homes.

“We hope people across the conference will understand that we are addressing the health needs of our staff while at the same time trying to provide the best service possible,” Knight said.

Bishop Felton Edwin May praised the conference staff. “They have shown commitment to their task in spite of illness and

Inspectors identified a strain of mold in the building as *Aspergillus*. Later, they also found *Stachybotrys*, a toxic black mold that has attracted recent media attention, according to the Rev. Jim Knowles-Tuell, conference treasurer. “Its spores are finer and harder to clean up, we’ve been told,” he said.

After working in cramped, temporary facilities and other locations for several weeks, most staff

difficult working conditions.”

Sick buildings are increasingly found in industrial nations today. Changes in building technology are the number one reason why there is an increase in illnesses, according to Dr. Ritchie Shoemaker, a family practitioner from Pocomoke City who has been treating many of the staff. Bishop May's family doctor, Dr. Warren Ross, identified Shoemaker as a possible specialist to help determine the bishop's unexplained illnesses that had continued for about five years.

“Buildings without adequate ventilation are often the home to unwanted molds. Our schools too are often contaminated, perhaps due to the inexpensive flat roof construction. We also have an increase in the number of people using basements for recreation and residence.”

Shoemaker's interest in the field heightened when patients came to him with unexplainable, persistent symptoms. Standard medical diagnostic tests are usually normal in patients who have biotoxin-induced illnesses, he said, making patients difficult to diagnose.

Many of these patients have been diagnosed with depression, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, or Irritable Bowel Syndrome, when in fact their illnesses were caused by biotoxins, Shoemaker said.

That prompted the doctor to ask why some people get sick and others don't, and why some people respond to treatment better than others. He spent two days at the Baltimore-Washington Conference offices examining the staff, analyzing blood samples and performing visual contrast sensitivity tests.

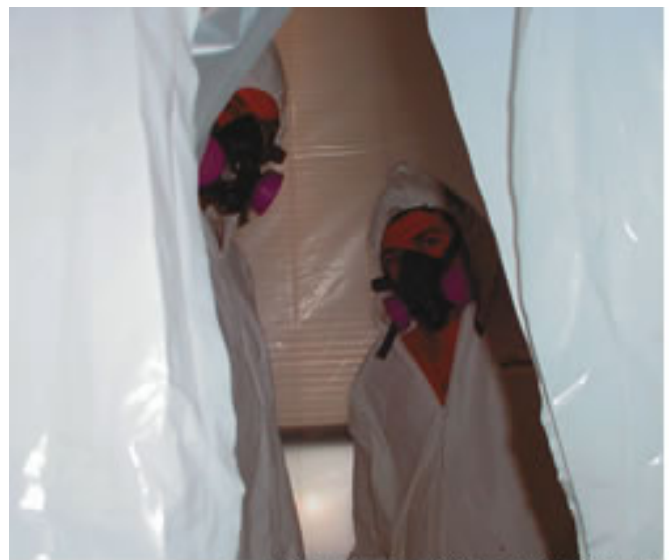
“This is a neurotoxicologic test that gives us a yes or no

answer in five minutes,” he said. “It tells us if there is evidence of neurotoxic effects or not. If there is a deficit, it doesn’t tell us what neurotoxin it is. The visual contrast test shows evidence of a neurological deficit. When biotoxins are suspected, individuals can be treated and additional vision tests can be used to monitor recovery.”

Knight and other staff members express frustration at the lack of answers to their medical questions. Go to five doctors, they said, and you get five different answers.

Shoemaker said this confusion may be caused by the fact that this illness does not result in a dose-response relationship. “There are no standards about how much exposure is safe,” he said. “Factors such as age, race, location and duration of exposure have nothing to do with the illness. When God made the immune response genes, he didn’t care what race you were, who your parents were, or how much money you have. He gave you a genetic control for the immune response and that is different for each individual.”

The owner of the sick building in Columbia took quick action to identify the problem and explore solutions, said Knight. However, those efforts are on hold until a group of specialists from Johns Hopkins University thoroughly test the building and then reports its findings, hopefully sometime in April.



Courtesy of Peter Steinmetz

Environmental workers prepare to remove mold from the conference center in Columbia in December 2002. The building remains vacant.

An initial effort to locate and remove the mold contamination in Shockley's area may have caused spores to become air-borne and then to spread to other parts of the building and affect other employees.

Knight is reluctant to predict if and when the staff will be able to return to a "clean" building. "So much depends on what the Johns Hopkins people find and how long it takes to fix the problems." The current building lease expires in 2006.

Knowles-Tuell said specialists at Johns Hopkins were invited at the suggestion of the landlord because of their reputation and because they would be neutral. "With them, we eliminate any perception that we are relying only on people brought in by the landlord," he said. Expenses are being paid by both the landlord and the conference.

The foremost concern is for the health of the employees, Knowles-Tuell emphasized. "We will do what it takes. We will continue to negotiate with our landlord about covering the rest."

Today, the good news for Shockley is that he may experience extreme fatigue only one day a week. "Under extreme stress, I might have a couple of days, but basically, I'm coming back up, and I'm starting to feel good," he said. "The big thing for me is the joy of finally knowing what all of my difficulties were related to."

Tom McAnally, *Nashville, Tenn., is the retired director of United Methodist News Service, the denomination's official news agency. Erik Alsgaard contributed to this story.*

The UMConnection is owned and published by the Commission on Communications of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church, Inc., 9720 Patuxent Woods Drive, Suite 100, Columbia, MD 21046-2943. It is published on the first and third Wednesday of every month. Subscriptions are \$15 per year.

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