

HOME

## Health Concerns about Mold Increase in Wake of May Floods at State House

by Sebastian Kitchen, [montgomeryadvertiser.com](http://montgomeryadvertiser.com)

Dianne Harper's doctor attributes the two painful surgeries on her sinuses to her 18 years of work in the Alabama State House.

The surgeries included scraping, a more than three-hour procedure to remove fungus the doctor compared to the consistency of soft serve ice cream, and later putting in a stent to try to deter future growth.

"He said he hadn't seen anything quite like it," Harper said.

She said the doctor attributes the fungus to the environment and is 99 percent certain it is from the State House. He even asked her if she could be moved to a different building.

Harper is not the only employee who has voiced her concern about the possible adverse effects on her health to the men who manage the Alabama House of Representatives and Senate on a daily basis. Those men said they also are concerned about the working environment.

### A 'sick building'

"I think it's a sick building," said Greg Pappas, the clerk of the House, who manages the operations and employees on a daily basis. "If you look behind these wall coverings you can see mold and mildew."

Many air vents in the building, in offices and in the House and Senate chambers, have mildew or other growth on and around them.

Some offices, including Pappas', have damage from water that has come through the ceiling or the windows.

In some offices, including the room used by the press on the first floor, the wallpaper is peeling back and growth can be seen on the wall.

While most people said there were problems there before the major flooding that hit central Alabama in May, they say those problems have intensified since the basement, first floor and other parts of the building flowed with water, forcing the Legislature to move across the street to the historic chambers at the Capitol for the first time since the 1980s.

Pappas said doctors for two employees in the House of Representatives who have serious health problems attributed those to the environment at their work. He was talking about Harper and another employee, whose doctor also suggested that he not work in the building.

"People ought to be concerned about it," he said. "I don't think it's a healthy building."

Harper took swabs of her office and the office next door, which is used by Rep. Greg Canfield.

She showed the *Montgomery Advertiser* the results of the tests, which were performed by the laboratory at Jackson Hospital and Clinic Inc., and at the state laboratory.

Those results showed two different mold species, penicillium and cladosporium. Penicillium is a common mold that can produce toxins and

### New Updated Statement of Qualifications (SOQ)



Partner with Pure Air Control Services on your next IAQ Project.

### IEQ Quiz of the Week

**Which of the following symptoms are associated with Upper Respiratory tract infection?**

- a) Sore throat
- b) Runny nose
- c) Conjunctivitis
- d) All of the above.

[See Results]

### Courtroom News



Asbestos - Focus

### Now Hiring



[Microbiologists/  
 Aerobiologists:](#)  
 Clearwater, FL  
 Atlanta, GA  
 Houston, TX

[Industrial Hygienists:](#)  
 Clearwater, FL  
 Atlanta, GA

[HVAC Remediation Techs.:](#)  
 Clearwater, FL  
 Atlanta, GA

[Sales Representative:](#)  
 Clearwater, FL  
 Atlanta, GA  
 West Palm Beach, FL

800-422-7873

**Your IEQ Hotline! Toll Free 800-422-7873**



**Free Preliminary Phone Consultation Services Available. Call Now!**

**Free Subscription to The IEQ Review**

First Name:

Last Name:

cladosporium is also a common fungus that can be a significant allergen, according to several Web sites.

Harper, a clerk for committees including the legislative contract review committee, said she is concerned about the long-term effects on her and other employees. She is also concerned about the regular CAT scans that are performed on her to see whether the fungus growth is coming back.

## 20 health complaints

Harper has collected written comments from 20 of her coworkers who have health issues that they attribute to working at the State House. She plans to submit those to the Legislative Building Authority, which oversees the facility, "so it is not just hearsay and they have it on paper."

Harper said more people have approached her with their stories, but they are reluctant to speak up out of fear of retribution.

State Sen. Roger Bedford, D-Russellville, said he has concerns about the health of the building and the structural soundness of the State House, which he said appears to be aging much faster after the massive flooding in May.

"This is not the healthy building the private sector or public sector would want," Bedford said. But, he added, there is not public support to build a new government building.

Staff for the House and Senate talked to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, had someone from the University of North Alabama examine the building, and talked with an official with the Division of Respiratory Disease Studies at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Pappas said the health department does not have a division to handle similar issues.

The staff said there was not a conclusive standard to determine the air quality in the building. Dave Avant, administrative assistant to the secretary of the Senate, said people have different tolerance levels and there is no barometer of what will make people sick.

"It's hard to get anybody to come in and say it's a sick building," Pappas said.

Don Ladner, administrative assistant to the clerk of the House, thought that might be because of legal concerns or issues with federal standards.

"You mention mold and nobody wants to sign off on it that you've got a problem," he said.

Another Senate official, Dowe Littleton, said they were told that there is not a way to determine whether the employees are sick because of air quality at work or because of conditions elsewhere, such as at their homes.

## Little recourse

Pappas and Avant said the EPA informed them there was not much that it could do.

Henry Slack of the Atlanta office of the EPA visited the State House in June. He offered generic advice to try to improve the work environment, according to legislative staff.

Carl Terry, spokesman with District IV of the EPA that covers the Southeast, said Slack was in Montgomery to attend a meeting and went to the State House to offer advice. The visit was not an official inspection and Slack did not write a report, he said.

"We have no statutory rights with regards to mold," Terry said. "We have no enforcement program with regards to that."

He said it was obvious there had been flooding in the

Email Address:

Company:

Add  Remove

Submit

Government Purchase Card &  
Credit Cards Accepted



building and there was a serious moisture problem.

"That results in problems with mold and mildew," Terry said. "A mold problem is common with a moisture problem."

Slack, he said, shared the EPA's Web site address and toll-free number for more information.

"When moisture problems occur and mold growth results, building occupants may begin to report odors and a variety of health problems, such as headaches, breathing difficulties, skin irritation, allergic reactions, and aggravation of asthma symptoms; all of these symptoms could potentially be associated with mold exposure," according to the EPA Web site.

"All molds have the potential to cause health effects. Molds produce allergens, irritants, and in some cases, toxins that may cause reactions in humans. The types and severity of symptoms depend, in part, on the types of mold present, the extent of an individual's exposure, the ages of the individuals, and their existing sensitivities or allergies."

Littleton said they have followed Slack's suggestions that were financially feasible.

"We've done all we can," he said. "We have followed what the expert asked us to do."

Littleton said there is not the political will to spend the money to make the capital improvements that would be needed, but that they have done what they could to improve the environment, including putting dehumidifiers in offices and in the Senate chamber.

Without a national standard for air quality in the work place, "we are doing the best we can," Littleton said.

Pappas said there are 19 dehumidifiers in offices on the fifth and sixth floors controlled by the House.

Harper has had the airflow, heating and cooling, shut off into her office. There is also a dehumidifier that runs just outside of her door.

### **Solutions expensive**

Littleton talked to Jean Cox-Ganser with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health on the phone. He said she suggested vendors the state could hire.

"It is very expensive," he said.

Ladner, who said he has problems with nasal drainage when he is in the building, said the environment in the building is perfect for mold because there are leaks, have been at least two floods, and there is vinyl wallpaper that does not allow the walls to breathe.

"You can pull it off and see it," he said of the mold.

Ladner said he was told by experts that people cannot get rid of the mold.

Top staff at the House and Senate feel they have done due diligence, but do not know where to turn. They also know they are working in an aging building, which was originally built to house the transportation department in 1963 and has old ductwork.

Avant said they tried to find something concrete they could give to lawmakers to demonstrate to them the possible effects on employees, "but you can't."

Bedford said he has heard from a number of employees. He said much of the damage from airborne elements comes from accumulation.

Bedford said the Legislative Building Authority needs to look at health issues and consider a way to help, such as increasing ventilation or implementing a

mold prevention program.

Rep. Richard Laird, D-Roanoke, has introduced a bill that would allow the authority to sell bonds, to enter into an agreement with the Retirement Systems of Alabama, to hire personnel, to connect to the Capitol, and to take control of some streets and parking lots in the Capitol complex. Laird is chairman of the building authority.

Ladner said he and Pappas would likely not be in their positions by the time a new State House was built.

"For people in the building all the time, they have a right to work in a safe, healthy environment," Ladner said.

Some lawmakers have talked about building a new State House because of concerns with the current facility, but a lot of those concerns were focused on public access with small meeting rooms.

There does not appear to be the political will, with an election looming and the state struggling financially due to the recession, to build a new State House.

"We think we owe it to employees to offer a safe environment," Avant said.

But, he said, they are stuck in the building and the options are limited.

"We don't have another place to put anybody," Littleton said.

<http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/article/20100207/NEWS02/2070325/1009/Health-concerns-about-mold-increase-in-wake-of-May-floods-at-State-House>

###

[PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION]

**Thank you for reading the IEQ REVIEW!**

Published by: Pure Air Control Services  
Copyright © 2010 Pure Air Control Services. All rights reserved.

Powered by **IMN™**

**TELL A FRIEND**  
View Archive