



MOLD IN 20 HOSP ROOMS

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April 23, 2006 -- New York Presbyterian-Columbia detected low levels of a potentially deadly mold in almost 20 rooms at its children's hospital from 2001 to 2004, according to state records obtained by The Post.

The test results released Friday showed traces of aspergillus, a common mold often found in construction dust. While state health officials said the low readings were not considered a threat to patients, a lawyer contended aspergillus at any level can be lethal to kids with weakened immune systems.

The revelation comes as three families prepare to sue the hospital for allegedly causing the deaths of their sick children by exposure to aspergillus.

A fourth family already has filed suit against Presbyterian and contractor Bovis Lend Lease, alleging 5-year-old Grace Murphy died in November 2002 of a lung infection caused by aspergillus. The deaths of Blaise Fitzpatrick, 9; Gabriela Martucci, 4; and McKenzie Smith, 3, may also be linked to the mold.

When told of the hospital's test results showing the presence of aspergillus, a lawyer for the families, Timothy F.X. Jones, said, "You can't have that stuff there at any level. It means that it's systemic . . . and spells unsafe construction practices."

The findings also do not answer the questions of whether aspergillus was present in rooms not sampled.

The hospital reported finding the aspergillus in air samples at its Babies and Children's Hospital on 168th Street and Broadway during construction of a children's hospital next door, the state Health Department said.

The tests found two potentially dangerous strains of aspergillus - niger and flavus - on the children's wards, but at levels that "did not present a risk to patients in their care," said Health Department spokesman Robert Kenny.

"Ideally, you never want to see the presence of any bacteria that may present a risk to patients," Kenny said.

But, he said, the hospital "was aggressive in its efforts to protect patients."

The state, responding to the four families' charges, launched investigations last fall into the children's deaths. It later closed the cases and has given Presbyterian a clean bill of health, Kenny said.

Presbyterian spokesman Bryan Dotson would not discuss the patient rooms found to have aspergillus.

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