Corporate Travel Policies Must Evolve Amid A Legionella Lottery For Business Travellers

Amid globally increasing Legionella rates, leading rapid testing expert Hydrosense is warning business and HR leaders of the serious implications for employees travelling and staying away with work.

Legionnaires' disease is a potentially fatal lung infection caused by inhaling droplets of water containing Legionella bacteria. It can be found in various man-made water systems, including taps, showers, air conditioning units, spa pools, and hot tubs.

Current estimates[1] indicate there are between 4,000 and 6,000 cases of Legionnaires' disease in the UK each year, with a fatality rate of 7 to 12 per cent among those infected. Experts warn that the UK is facing an increased risk of Legionella, fuelled by climate change and warmer temperatures, which create ideal breeding conditions for the bacteria.

Crucially for business and HR leaders, Legionella can pose particular risks for employees travelling for work due to a myriad of reasons. Foremost, buildings that are used less frequently during the colder months - including hotel rooms, which have been found to have a 32 per cent inoccupancy rate[2] - are especially vulnerable to outbreaks when water systems are neglected or left unused for extended periods. Adding to the risk for overseas business travellers, many countries worldwide continue to experience higher-than-usual incidences of Legionnaires' disease and lack the same level of regulatory oversight as the UK.

Additional concerns arise from the use of hotel hot tubs and spa pools, which are particularly prone to Legionella contamination due to their warm water temperatures and aerosolising jets.

In light of this, Hydrosense is urging business and HR leaders to carefully review their corporate travel policies to ensure they are doing everything possible to protect employees from exposure to Legionella, especially while travelling for work.

Greg Rankin, CEO of Hydrosense, comments: "With a new quarter now upon us, there's likely to be a lot of business travel due to an upswing in purchasing power, review meetings, and prospects for the year ahead. While Legionella may not be the first concern when ensuring safe travel for employees, the assumption that hotels will cover this as part of their health and safety strategy is a risk employers can ill afford to take. Indicative of this, just recently two of our employees found Legionella pneumophila in their hotel rooms at two different premises, prompting us to adopt an even more rigorous approach to Legionella detection for our team when they travel on business".

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"The fact is that Legionella is increasing globally at an alarming rate, posing a significant risk for hotels given their complex water systems and high-risk exposure points, such as hot tubs, pools, and spas. Fluctuating occupancy rates can exacerbate this risk by leading to stagnation and creating ideal conditions for Legionella bacteria growth. With 32% of hotel rooms unoccupied, this means that - without proper water management procedures - employees staying in hotels are very much facing a Legionella lottery".

About one in ten people who contract Legionnaires' disease will die due to complications from their illness. Seven in eight survivors will suffer long-term impacts on their quality of life, including fatigue, neurologic and neuromuscular symptoms, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Over the past two decades, reported cases of Legionnaires' disease have been rising worldwide. In 2021, the EU/EEA reported the highest annual notification rate of Legionnaires' disease to date, with 2.4 cases per 100,000 people.[3] More recently, in 2023, Scotland reported the highest number of cases seen since 2012.[4]

Greg adds: "The statistics show that the scale and severity of Legionella cases in the UK and all across the world are increasing at concerning levels. As such, there has never been a more appropriate time for HR and business leaders to take a proactive stance by providing employees with the means to better protect themselves from the Legionella risk. By testing hotel water systems, employees can identify potential threats before exposure occurs, ensuring they are not unknowingly placed at risk. Every Legionella test taken is an opportunity to safeguard against what is, unfortunately, becoming an increasing health concern - particularly for the business travel community".

Resources:

1) *www.britsafe.org/safety-management/2020/legionella-risks-emerging-from-lockdown*
2) *www.zoomshift.com/blog/hotel-industry-statistics/*
3) *www.pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12060869/*
4) *www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/legionnaires-disease-annual-epidemiological-report-2021#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20highest%20annual,cases%20per%20100%20000%20population.*

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