

Stressful *business*

*Employee assistance
program can prove
beneficial to bottom line*
page 16

Easing the Pain
*Ergonomic programs
can pay off* page 6

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P.O. Box 511 ■ Cedar Rapids, IA 52406

Managing Mold

*Air quality test can give peace of
mind after flood reconstruction*

page 20

Proof Positive

*Drug testing can avoid costly
hires, reduce liabilities* page 24



Above: Derek Klinkenborg, left, and Andrew Anderson, employees of Cody's Inc. in Palo, power-clean the ground floor of Smulekoff's in downtown Cedar Rapids on July 11 after floor and wall coverings were removed because of flood damage. Mark Tade photo/EdgeBusiness

At left: Slade Smith, industrial hygienist/construction inspector with BEM Corp. from St. Cloud, Minn., tests the air quality for mold spores at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids on July 29. Air is pulled across a small glass plate coated with an adhesive. The plates are then sent to a lab for analysis. Mark Tade photo/EdgeBusiness

Managing mold

Businesses look to long-term health of buildings, employees after floods

By Cindy Hadish

Of all the buildings reopening after Iowa's historic floods in June, indoor air quality testing is undoubtedly most stringent at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids.

The hospital, which reopened after cleaning and repair of flood damage from several inches of Cedar River water, had to meet standards for "anything and everything," including mold, bacteria, dust and noxious chemicals, said Dr. Mark Valliere, Mercy's chief medical officer.

For most other businesses, standards are not written in stone, but experts say any company would benefit by staying vigilant to keep their

buildings healthy after flood reconstruction.

Dustin Hinrichs, spokesman for Linn County Public Health, said the health department does not require indoor air quality testing before a business reopens.

Restaurants must meet sanitation standards during a reinspection before reopening, he said.

Although not required, many building owners choose to have indoor air quality tested for lessees or employees, said Slade Smith, president of Building Environmental Management of St. Cloud, Minn.

"A lot of them do want it so their occupants have some sort of peace of mind," said Smith, a registered industrial hygienist.

Smith, who has worked with Mercy, as well as the Alliant and GreatAmerica buildings and others in downtown Cedar Rapids, said the hospital had to report testing results to regulatory agencies.

For other companies, general guidelines are

offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency, but no written standards address, for example, how many mold spores are too much.

Wayne Sanderson, University of Iowa associate professor in the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health, said business owners that had their buildings stripped and properly cleaned and dried should feel safe reopening, even without air-quality tests.

"You don't need a Ph.D. industrial hygienist to tell you," he said.

The most practical approach to ensuring a building is healthy is a visual inspection, he said.

"If you don't see mold and don't see any water incursion, you're probably OK," Sanderson said.

A white glove test — literally using a white glove to check the tops of doors, windows and other surfaces — could also help identify problem areas where mold spores could settle.

At flood-damaged buildings at the UI, experts have been taking surface samples to send to a lab, which examines the samples under a microscope for evidence of organic spores that would indicate the area had not been properly cleaned.

Air samples have also been taken, a measure Sanderson said is beyond what is necessary, but something the university is pursuing for the same peace of mind as other businesses.

“The danger with air samples is there are no federal standards,” he said.

The samples can be compared with readings from other flooded buildings, control buildings that haven’t been flooded and even outdoor air, but Sanderson said a visual inspection in most cases will suffice.

Beyond that, employers should keep an eye on absenteeism to see if employees are taking more sick days after the business reopens.

Headaches, eye irritation, breathing problems and lethargy are some of the symptoms associated with an unhealthy building.

Dr. Jeffrey Westpheling, occupational physician at St. Luke’s Work Well Clinic, said some employees may be sensitive to formaldehyde and other chemicals from new synthetic products, such as carpeting and furniture.

Businesses reopening with all new furnishings should ensure they have a proper fresh air exchange, he said, adding that proper cleaning of flood-damaged surfaces also is essential.

Sanderson said bleach will kill mold and bacteria, but has irritating properties.

Antimicrobials, which many companies are touting, are registered with the EPA, and have superior properties “that bleach may or may not have,” he said.

“There’s no magic bullet,” Sanderson said. “This is a huge mess and people will struggle with this for a while.”

Chuck Gilpin speaks from experience he gained at his own home and properties that were affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Gilpin of Gulf States Mold Guard in Slidell, La., said it is important for companies to document how their property was cleaned, especially if they intend to sell a building that had been flooded.

Gilpin’s company offers a 10-year warranty on its antimicrobial surface treatment, which stays with the property if the owner sells.

He also advised building owners to examine heating and ventilation systems and elevator shafts where mold spores can travel or be trapped.

George Vincent, vice-president of Big Sky Environmental Solutions of Jupiter, Fla., said Iowa’s flooding differs from many hurricanes because of the contaminants — farm chemicals, fecal matter and other bacteria — in the floodwaters.

The environmentally safe antimicrobials his

company used on the Westside Maid-Rite and elsewhere in Cedar Rapids kills both mold and bacteria, he said.

Although flooded with 7 feet of water, Maid-Rite reopened in mid-July.

Theresa Blair, spokeswoman for Smulekoff’s in Cedar Rapids, said the store has gone beyond what is required for cleanup to ensure a safe environment for employees and customers.

Smulekoff’s hired Smith, the industrial hygienist, for air sampling both for employee and customer health and as an added assurance that its merchandise is safe, she said.

Mary Bryant, administrator of the Iowa Occupational Safety and Health Administration enforcement program, said even without air-quality standards, the agency could investigate complaints of unhealthy work environments.

The agency was in Cedar Rapids immediately following the flood to offer advice on flood safety and cleanup, but at this point, “general housekeeping” citations and fines could be issued if the condition of the property warranted, she said.

A free consultation service is offered at the employers request, but given the staff available, Bryant said, “we’re not going to be able to go to every business.”

Information on the consultation service is available by going to labor services at www.iowaworkforce.org