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Editorial

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EDITORIAL- LONG ISLAND BUSINESS NEWS

Growth Strategies- Unleashing Canines on Sick Buildings David Harvey gets numerous calls from building owners with indoor air quality complaints. As vice president of technical development at Bay Shore-based Tradewinds Environmental Restoration, Harvey listens to the caller carefully, and asks: Are the building occupants complaining of things like headaches and throat irritations?

It's all part of his thorough investigation in which he and his team of inspectors conduct evaluations of buildings in search of lurking environmental culprits. Sometimes there's not enough fresh air coming into the building. And sometimes there's an incursion of moisture or perhaps a hidden condition prompting the growth of mold. That's when it's time to send in the dogs.

Tradewinds uses specially trained Labradors that sniff for mold, which gives off an organic compound. The company has on staff three handlers, each of whom lives with a Lab that's been specially trained to sniff out mold the way other dogs are trained to detect bombs or drugs, Harvey said.

"The dogs scratch the area where they smell mold," Harvey says.

They send the dogs in one at a time, place a marker where the dog has scratched, and send in another dog as a quality control precaution. Once they've confirmed an area may

have mold, the inspector uses fiber-optic cameras to look behind walls, so that the detection creates as little disturbance as possible.

Using dogs to sniff out mold is not common practice in the United States, but it is more popular in Sweden and Denmark and throughout Scandinavia, Harvey said. But dogs are just one of the "tools" industrial hygienists like Tradewinds use in detecting toxic mold. And mold is only one of the possible offenders. Other suspects can include asbestos, lead or chemicals.

Poor indoor air quality can be caused by inadequate ventilation, chemical contaminants from indoor or outdoor sources, or biological contaminants, according to a fact sheet from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Indicators of "sick building syndrome," according to EPA, can include headaches; ear, nose and throat irritation; dry coughs; dizziness and nausea; difficulty in concentrating; fatigue; and sensitivity to odors.

Programs like the EPA's have raised the public's overall awareness of indoor air quality, experts say.

"The typical scenario is that people allege that persistent cold and flu-like symptoms only go away when they are out of the building's environment," notes Barry S. Cohen, a partner in the environmental law group at McMillan, Rather, Bennett & Rigano.

And business owners that are tenants rather than building owners, take note: "The property owner has an obligation to the tenant to provide habitable space," Cohen says.

Glenn Neuschwender, president of Ronkonkoma-based Envirosience Consultants, says that in some cases there's only one person who had felt fine until he or she began working in the building. In other instances people notice they feel better when they are away on vacation, and it's not until they are back in the building that the symptoms return. And what may be irritating to one may not be irritating to another.

When building occupants become proactive in registering complaints, building managers often call an industrial hygienist to evaluate the symptoms, investigate the building and come up with a plan of action, experts say.

"In our inspections, we use tests to validate what we hypothesize," Harvey says. "We anticipate all different types of problems and use so many different tools to treat the cause."

Neuschwender conducts an extensive health survey as part of his investigation. It's how he matches symptoms to the physical characteristics of the building. If people complain of fatigue, he investigates the building's air change as well as its heating, ventilation and air-condition system.

"During the energy crisis, buildings cut down on the outside air brought in to decrease costs. This increases the likelihood of a buildup of carbon dioxide, whose levels we can monitor," Neuschwender says.

If people complain of upper respiratory problems, Neuschwender determines whether

there are fungi, mold or bacteria causing an infectious building.

Treating the cause is crucial. Lead paint can be removed. Asbestos can be removed or encased. But mold poses a more complex problem. If you don't get at the source of what's causing the mold, it will simply grow back.

Harvey said he's seen cases caused by drywall that was allowed to get damp during the construction process. There have been instances where people cite construction defect and file lawsuits against architects. "It's a big deal in legal circles," Cohen says.

Even after the source of the sick building syndrome has been eliminated, building owners may still need to consider a course of action.

"Buildings may need a regular program of duct cleaning," Harvey says. "That's good to do when changing from air-conditioning to heating."

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