

House Lawmakers Seek NIH Insight On Fungal Meningitis Outbreak Response

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A bipartisan duo of lawmakers on the House Energy and Commerce Committee's health panel has asked the National Institutes of Health to weigh in on medical issues related to last year's fungal meningitis outbreak, including the agency's role in finding treatments. The outbreak stirred legislative action related to FDA oversight, but a researcher said medical issues -- including the adequacy of treatments and diagnostics used on infected patients -- has been absent from the debate.

Reps. Frank Pallone (D-NJ), the top Democrat on Energy and Commerce's health panel, and Mike Rogers (R-MI) Thursday (May 9) asked NIH to provide information on research conducted on the pathogen at the center of the outbreak, *Exserohilum rostratum*, which has not previously been associated with human disease, they said.

„Because clinicians have no previous experience with *Exserohilum rostratum* meningitis, they are having a hard time finding the best way to treat it,” the lawmakers say in the letter. „We therefore would like to better understand NIH's role in helping to find better treatments for these patients, and more broadly, in developing treatments for systemic fungal infections generally.” The lawmakers also call for more research in general to develop better treatments for fungal diseases.

Nearly 14,000 patients in 20 states have possibly been infected with the pathogen, the lawmakers say. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most updated statistics, 55 people died and 741 were infected.

Lawmakers in the House and Senate have been eying FDA's role in preventing a similar outbreak from occurring in the future. While the upper chamber is considering a slew of regulatory reforms targeting drug compounding, the House has focused more on investigating the agency's use of current authorities. Still, talk about medical research's role in responding to the outbreak has been largely ignored, said David Perlin, executive director and professor at New Jersey Medical School's Public Health Research Institute, who called for more NIH involvement on the topic.

While the compounding industry and FDA authorities should be addressed, physicians are also still treating infected patients and have little information about the associated fungus, Perlin said.

„In my view this is no different than the (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic,” he said, noting there was public money invested in research after the outbreak because there was the possibility it would emerge again. Similarly, the pathogen at the center of the meningitis outbreak should be studied to prepare for the possibility it could infect others in the future. Therefore, NIH should engage research on prevention, treating patients who are already infected and patients who are infected, but not yet ill, Perlin said.

Researchers, he said, are self-funding current efforts. For his part, Perlin helped develop a rapid detection test to identify the fungus in infected patients. Still, more research should be done on diagnostics and treatments used on infected patients, he said. Doctors primarily use the anti-fungal drug Voriconazole, but it should be further studied.

„We need much more information to be able to understand whether this is truly the best therapy for these patients,” Perlin said.

Researchers, he said, can „move the field,” but their direction is based on funding. „We could wait a year and a half and get funding,” he said. „The reality is these patients need attention now.”

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