

Mould in Schools: A continuing health concern

■ by **Susan Ansara**
and **Jackie Pynaert**

The negative health effects of mould in public buildings first came to light about two decades ago. Despite years of research and media attention, the potentially debilitating health effects of mould are still poorly understood. Proper identification and effective remediation continue to be challenging.

Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, employers have an obligation to provide a healthy and safe work environment for workers. Health Canada's recent research indicates that exposure to mould results in cellular and biochemical changes in the body and, therefore, supports "the need to prevent damp conditions and mould growth and to remediate any fungal contamination in buildings."¹

Unfortunately, many of Ontario's school boards are still not taking the presence of mould seriously enough. The health concerns expressed by teachers and educational workers are trivialized by their employers and, disappointingly, sometimes by their colleagues.

ETFO and the Lambton Kent District School Board's dispute over mould

During the last school year, ETFO was engaged in a long dispute with the Lambton Kent District School Board regarding the presence of mould in the board's schools, the investigation techniques the board used, and its remediation practices.

In an effort to ensure the health and safety of our members, ETFO undertook a media campaign (paid media as well as media releases), filed complaints with the Ministry of Labour and the Ontario Labour Relations Board, and filed grievances.

The two sides reached a resolution to the dispute in a settlement mediated by William Kaplan. This settlement stipulates that a mutu-

ally agreed-upon independent consultant – Echo Management Inc., under the direction of the highly renowned environmental specialist Dr. Om Malik – will conduct a thorough assessment of all Lambton Kent elementary schools. It also provides for the remediation of any issues that Dr. Malik finds during the course of his assessments.

This mediated settlement should have positive implications for all ETFO locals in the province and is in the best interests of ETFO members and the students we teach.

What to do if you suspect exposure to mould

The issues surrounding mould in public buildings are complex. If you believe that your work environment may be compromised follow these steps:

- Fill out the proper "incident form" from your school board
- Notify your supervisor
- Notify your local
- Bring your concerns forward to your worker member on your Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee.

All research indicates that, in order to prevent mould from growing, "prompt attention to condensation and water leaks in the building fabric, and wet building materials (resulting from plumbing or other causes, such as flood or storm damage) will eliminate the growth of mould."² Therefore, if you notice water damage, including leaking roofs, report it immediately.

Whether it is mould or another issue, you should take your health and safety seriously. Remember that if something does not feel right, it probably isn't. Take the steps necessary to ensure your work environment is healthy and safe. **v**

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Common Myths

Mould is a problem only in portables.

Mould can grow on any surface. It feeds on drywall, carpet, underpad, ceiling tiles, wood, and wallpaper, and in drains and HVAC systems. Any area that has sustained water damage is a potential source of mould. Therefore, classrooms and other rooms in the main school building have the potential for mould growth.

Mould cannot hurt you. It grows everywhere.

Mould does grow everywhere; however, if amplified levels of mould growth are occurring indoors, there is a problem. Also, certain species of mould (often referred to as black mould) – *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, and *Stachybotrys* – produce toxins that are extremely dangerous to human health.

Dead mould is not dangerous.

Dead mould is dangerous. It is still allergenic. Some dead mould is toxic.

Cleaning mould with bleach will solve the problem.

Bleach is not recommended. In most cases, it is not desirable to sterilize the area where mould has grown. Some mould spores will continue to exist. They will continue to grow if a source of moisture reappears.

Air quality tests detect the presence of mould.

Air quality tests do not detect the presence of mould.

Moisture-level tests detect the presence of mould.

Moisture-level tests are sometimes useful; however, they can be unreliable and should never be used in isolation. Dangerous levels of mould have been detected when moisture levels were found to be in the “acceptable” range.

If you cannot see mould, it is not there.

The majority of dangerous mould is not visible. Guidelines indicate that in cases where there is a history of water intrusion and where occupants have health complaints, multiple methods of investigation are necessary. Other recommended tests include bulk sampling (tape lift), spore-trap sampling, and Andersen (N6) air sampling for mould. If illness persists, invasive testing must be employed.³

If only one person is sick, it cannot be because of the building.

People react differently to different stimuli and not everyone will have a negative reaction to mould. Common complaints of people who are allergic to mould include skin irritations, respiratory complaints, coughing, eye irritations, headaches, nosebleeds, and ongoing flulike symptoms.

Once removed from the dangerous environment, a person will no longer suffer adverse health effects.

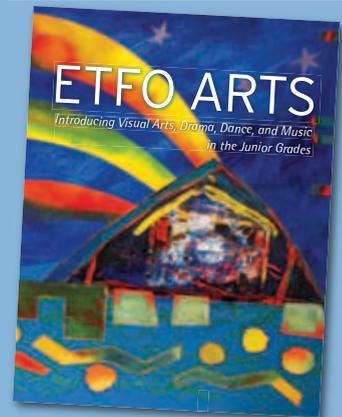
For some persons that may be true; however, for others the condition will persist and will require ongoing medical intervention. For those who are highly susceptible, exposure may result in a permanent disability.

Notes

1. Health Canada (2007), Environmental and Workplace Health, hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/index_e.html

2. Health Canada (2007), op. cit.

3. Echo Management Inc.



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