

Correction due: CDC must own data error in VA water case

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By the Editorial Board / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Responsible for protecting us from threats and curing what ails us, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have a public respect accorded few other federal agencies. Sadly, the CDC betrayed the public trust by obfuscating data in a 2015 journal article on an outbreak of Legionnaire's disease at the Pittsburgh VA Healthcare System. CDC officials corrected the article nearly two years later only after the [Post-Gazette's Sean D. Hamill](#) exposed their shenanigans and the journal's editor, Robert Schooley, pursued the correction.

The manipulation of data is a reprehensible breach of scientific ethics. The CDC should be contrite. Instead, it's defiant, acknowledging a "small data error" in its findings — as if two numbers had been innocently transposed — while insisting that the misrepresentation had no effect on the article's conclusions. The real conclusions to be drawn here relate to the agency's broken culture, with has permitted lapses in judgment to multiply like bacteria in a petri dish.

Dr. Schooley, the editor of Clinical Infectious Diseases, and U.S. Rep. Tim Murphy, R-Upper St. Clair, understand the significance of the CDC's wayward behavior. Dr. Schooley has called the article's language "misleading" and the correction "a big deal." Mr. Murphy, chairman of the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, gave Mr. Hamill's July 23 story on the belated correction to new CDC chief Brenda Fitzgerald and told her it deserved attention. According to Mr. Murphy, Dr. Fitzgerald agreed to look into it.

Six veterans died from the 2011-12 Legionnaire's outbreak in the VA hospital's water, and 16 others were seriously sickened. In December, Mr. Hamill reported that CDC official appeared less interested in determining the true cause of the outbreak than in using the tragedy to discredit the water disinfection system there and two former VA researchers who had championed it. The bias carried over into the journal article, which said the disinfection system failed to kill the Legionella bacteria "within" 24 hours but failed to note that the data also revealed success "at" the 24-hour mark.

In its own investigation, the VA's inspector general faulted maintenance of the disinfection system, not the system itself.

In December, after the CDC's misconduct came to light, Mr. Murphy and U.S. Sen. Bob Casey Jr. asked the CDC to conduct an internal review. Months later, the CDC acknowledged a "small data error," cited the correction in the journal and, demonstrating an unscientific aversion to further inquiry, pronounced the matter "closed."

The CDC has layered one misdeed upon another. It sullied the investigation of a fatal disease outbreak, misrepresented its findings in a professional journal and tried to evade accountability for its misdeeds. When articles are inaccurate, scientists should rush to correct them, knowing that the public and other researchers rely on their findings. In this case, Dr. Schooley said he had to approach the agency about a correction, which appeared in the journal's June issue.

Dr. Fitzgerald would be wise to heed Mr. Murphy's advice. The CDC needs to be put under a microscope.