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## Covance TB cases show risk, foes say

*Public shouldn't worry, firm says*

Luci Scott

The Arizona Republic  
Dec. 4, 2006 12:00 AM

A Valley group trying to keep drug-testing company Covance from building an animal-testing facility in Chandler has uncovered documents showing that tuberculosis was discovered in monkeys in the company's Madison, Wis., facility.

The incident, which happened in June, came to light after Michael Boerman, a member of Chandler-based Citizens Against Covance, made a public-records request and obtained documents detailing the outbreak from Wisconsin.

Critics say Covance wasn't forthcoming with information when it was answering questions about its operation and making the case to build a facility in Arizona. The revelation plays into a common charge that Covance, which plans to build a research facility on 50 acres near Chandler Municipal Airport, is secretive about what goes on inside its laboratories.

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Covance destroyed 32 other monkeys in the same room as the five monkeys that tested positive, documents show.

Tests showed no evidence of the disease in employees, the company said.

"We're very disturbed that Covance did not disclose this outbreak to the people of Chandler or to city officials," said Patrick Sullivan, spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, another Covance foe.

"We think they should have informed the mayor and other members of the council who have actually visited the Madison facility where this happened," Sullivan said. "This is a public health concern that people in Chandler ought to be aware of."

Chandler City Councilman Martin Sepulveda visited Madison in October to talk to regulators there about the company's environmental record. He said he does not recall having a discussion with Covance about a TB outbreak but said, "I feel comfortable with what I saw."

The council was involved with the Covance plan to come to the Valley until recently, when Covance found a new Chandler site that would not require a zoning change.

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- 95 percent of the animals are rodents.

- 1 percent are primates

- Others include

- 99 out of 100 of the animals are later found to be unsafe or ineffective for humans.

Source: James Covance general

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Covance says TB in lab monkeys is rare.

"The last case I saw was a single case, and that was 12 years ago," said Donna Clemons, head of veterinary services for Covance in Madison.

Dr. Kathy Orr, a staff veterinarian at the Phoenix Zoo, had a different assessment.

"It's not terribly uncommon to have TB show up, especially in imported primates, because they're exposed to people in undeveloped countries that have more TB than we do," Orr said.

The disease can be transmitted between primates and humans, and the zoo routinely tests its primates and employees.

"The risk of spreading outside the (research) facility is pretty slim," she said.

She said that in well-managed labs, employees handling monkeys wear masks and gloves, and the animals and employees are routinely tested for TB, a chronic infection that usually attacks the lungs.

Covance employees wear protective gear, and employees are routinely tested, the company said. Covance tests monkeys for TB on a quarterly basis.

Elizabeth Lawaczek, Arizona's public health veterinarian, said most people don't get sick with TB unless they have household contact with another person with the infection.

"They need to be in an enclosed air space for an extended period of time," she said. "Usually four hours are needed."

Arizona law requires that primates be tested for three ailments before they're brought in: TB, the virus simian herpes B, and simian immunodeficiency virus (similar to HIV in humans), Lawaczek said.

Aysha Akhtar, a public health specialist and senior medical and research adviser to the physicians group, said, "I'm not surprised that Covance hid this information from the public, considering Covance's track record."

Boerman said he began the process of the public-records request after getting an anonymous tip from a disgruntled ex-employee at Covance.

He said he was angry that "it appears as though there was an attempt to cover up the fact that there had been an outbreak."

Boerman of Citizens Against Covance, emphasized that he's not an animal-rights activist.

"I live and work in Chandler, and this is the most polarizing thing I've ever come across. I'm just trying to do what's good for the community."

Local Covance spokeswoman Camilla Strongin said she hopes the issue will be kept in proportion.

"I would hate for the public to think they are at risk. . . . This is not something the public needs to worry about."

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