Don’t let bedbugs bite at work

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Most people work in an office — not in a bed — so why should a firm’s human resources department be concerned about bedbugs?

“This summer you’ll see this (bedbug problem) explode,” said Peter Di Eduardo, a senior manager with Bell Environmental Services, a pest control company.

Those who’ve experienced bedbug problems at work already know the risks.

David Cassidy, a lawyer with Norris McLaughlin & Marcus P.A. of Bridgewater, N.J., said that when he returns home each evening after work or travel, he takes off his suit and shoes and seals them in a plastic bag before entering the house. His dry-cleaning bill may be huge, but he’s happy to say his house is bedbug free.

Cassidy said his office once had bedbugs, so he knows first hand what a difficult problem it can be to deal with.

While Cassidy admits he’s a bit extreme when it comes to preventing a bedbug infestation, he said proper precautions are a good idea for every professional — especially those who travel or perform work functions in people’s homes.

Cassidy and Di Eduardo were speaking to a group of professionals at a seminar in Allentown hosted by Tallman, Hudders & Sorrentino P.C., the Pennsylvania office of Norris McLaughlin, about the liability that businesses face over the issue of bedbugs in the workplace.

While New York and Philadelphia and other major cities have grabbed the biggest headlines over the growing problem of bedbugs, Di Eduardo said they exist in the Lehigh Valley as well. And with the number of Lehigh Valley residents that commute to the cities, he said the bedbug population is commuting with them more and more.

Cassidy said the major issues employers have to worry about with regard to bedbugs are transmission and liability.

A firm such as Bell Environmental can come into an office and identify the location or locations of the bedbug infestation — often with a bug-sniffing dog — and eradicate them. However, if an employee is bringing the bedbugs into the office from home, the infestation will recur if the home issue isn’t addressed.

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— David Cassidy, Esq.
Norris McLaughlin & Marcus P.A.
Bridgewater, N.J.

The questions are: “Who pays for it?” and “Who is liable?” said Cassidy.

The difficulty in answering those questions comes in the trouble involved in tracing the origination of the bedbug infestation, he said.

An employee might say that he or she became infested with bedbugs at the office and took them home and expected the company to pay for extermination services.

Cassidy said many of the earliest examples of bedbugs infestations originating on the jobs were from C-level or higher managers who traveled. They told their companies that they became infested with the bedbugs from a hotel or taxi, and asked the firm to reimburse them for exterminating services because the infestation happened due to their work.

He said companies generally paid the expense to keep those managers happy, but as the bedbug problem spreads — as he expects it will — companies need to decide how far they’ll go to keep bedbugs from being an office problem and have a policy in place to deal with any issues that crop up.

He said that when developing policies, a company has to take into account issues such as a business’ reputation. That reputation is especially important for businesses, like a doctor or chiropractor’s office, restaurants or hotels, which could lose customers and revenue if a bedbug infestation is found.

In fact, Cassidy said that while trying to arrange a seminar in New York City, he couldn’t find a hotel that would book him, because they didn’t want their names associated with bedbugs under any conditions — even educational.

Moneta also needs to be a concern, because if employees are concerned about bedbugs in the office, productivity will go down.

Rules of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also need to be considered, he said.

While bedbugs aren’t a specific health concern — they aren’t known to carry any diseases — their presence can be problematic. Employees could have allergic reactions to bug bites or to any pesticides that might be used to fight the bugs.

Legal issues can range from negligence, for failing to keep bedbugs out of the office to privacy or defamation issues if an employee feels he or she was singled out and embarrassed as the source of an infestation. But whether it’s legal or cost issues, Cassidy said he expects employers will have to get involved because the federal and state governments don’t seem to be taking the lead.

“Because this hasn’t been seen as a big public health concern, I predict the burden will fall on the employers,” said Cassidy.

Tips for avoiding bedbugs in the office

• Hang your bag and coat from a doorknob or hook.
• Keep your personal items off the floor.
• Keep a change of clothing at work if you believe you may be exposed to bedbugs. Try not to wear work clothing home, in your car, or on the train if you believe you may have been exposed to bedbugs.
• When you change your clothing, put your work clothes in a plastic bag.
• Avoid wearing pants with cuffs.
• Cover your skin (no open toe shoes or shorts) and tuck your pant legs into your socks.

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