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This Place Makes Me Sick

By ARNOLD MANN Sunday, June 24, 2001

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Bernice Polansky's mysterious symptoms began creeping through her body in 1989, four years after she started working at Southwest Airlines' 24-hour San Antonio, Texas, reservations center, an amphitheater-like building housing 600 agents. First came the headaches-- every day, two hours after she arrived at work. She noticed other agents bringing aspirin to work. Anyone who ran out could go down to the central-console area, where supervisors were dispensing aspirin from large bottles. Polansky joined the aspirin poppers.

Then came the sinus infections, muscle pain, nausea, dizziness and fatigue--"a whole body weakness." Others complained of weakness too, though no one seemed to know the cause. Ambulances occasionally arrived to treat people for breathing problems, fainting, seizures, even strokes. Her children were the first to notice when the logic in her sentences began breaking down. By 1992 Polansky was bedridden and on workmen's comp.

Today 59-year-old Polansky is "better but still not 100%." She has used up her time on workmen's comp, which she was awarded for unrelated but disabling ergonomic pain. And she's been terminated by Southwest for failing to return to work within the 36 months allowed for medical leave. Along with half a dozen other employees who have spoken out about their health problems, Polansky is consumed by mounting medical bills, the cost of her lawsuits against the airline and the air-conditioning company that serviced the building, and by Southwest's countercharge that she is an opportunist whose medical problems are unrelated to the building.

However, interviews with 14 current and past employees, as well as building-inspection reports obtained by TIME, suggest that Southwest's San Antonio center is a "sick building" whose closed-circulation air supply has been contaminated by toxin-producing molds and bacteria.

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Sick-building syndrome, as scientists and health officials call it, is a disease of modern architecture: sealed, energy-conserving buildings continually recycle contaminated air. According to a survey by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), one-third of the 70 million Americans who work indoors are quartered in buildings that are breeding grounds for an array of contaminants, from molds and bacteria to volatile organic compounds like formaldehyde. A 1996 Cornell University study found the problem was even worse: in every one of 35 buildings surveyed for the study, at least 20% of the occupants had experienced symptoms. "It's very difficult to find a problem-free building," says Dr. Alan Hedge, author of the Cornell study and co-author of the book *Keeping Buildings Healthy* (John Wiley & Sons; 1998).

Among the formerly sick: Harvard's Brigham and Women's Hospital, where 47 nurses wound up on disability leave in 1993 because of allergic reactions to the latex in surgical gloves that clung to surfaces in the building; Florida's Martin County Courthouse, where fungi infestation required a \$3.5 million gutting by workers wearing respirators and bodysuits; even the EPA's Washington offices, where brand-new carpets were blamed for gas emissions and were removed. OSHA's beleaguered inspectors can't begin to keep up with the complaints. A whole new business of industrial-hygiene companies has sprung up, offering everything from one-shot inspections to year-round prevention programs.

"A basket of symptoms with no clear cause," as one expert termed it, sick-building syndrome can confine itself to one office or spread through an entire building. Some workers will get it; others won't. Symptoms are usually confined to the workplace, but in some cases, like Polansky's, they can hang on for years, even after a worker has left a building. According to Dr. Claudia Miller of the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, repeated exposure to toxins given off by molds and bacteria may hypersensitize people to the point that they react to even low levels of these toxins. It may also weaken their tolerance to everyday chemicals in car exhaust, perfumes, cleaning agents and some foods and drugs.

Southwest's San Antonio mold problem dates back to the 1980s, but the first clean-up attempt wasn't made until 1994. By that time, workers say, fungi were literally dropping out of the ceiling vents into their coffee. When the fabric used as a wall covering was removed, the wallboards underneath were coated with black mold. All the renovations, including removal and replacement of mold-infested carpeting, ceiling tiles and wallboards, and chemical scouring of the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system, were done while employees were working.

Inspection reports from 1995 and 1996 obtained by TIME reveal that a wide variety of active molds, including *Stachybotrys* and *Penicillium*, continued to grow inside the building, alongside



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bacterial levels that were 200 times as great as OSHA's suggested "contamination threshold." Yet the '96 report, prepared by Crawford Risk Control Services for Southwest's insurance company, rated airborne spore counts inside the building as "normal" compared with those outside. Reviewing this record, Dr. David Straus of Texas Tech University's Health Sciences Center observed, "There's nothing normal about *Stachybotrys*. It produces a bad toxin. That's all I can say." Moreover, argues Cornell's Alan Hedge, the inspectors "only took air samples on one day, and fungi don't produce spores all the time. Typically, you [sample] over a series of days." Testing for mycotoxins and bacterial endotoxins, experts agree, might have told a different story.

Despite these expert reviews, Southwest maintains that the company is the victim of a litigious campaign inspired by Houston immunotoxicologist Andrew Campbell, who first diagnosed sick-building syndrome in Polansky and 12 of her co-workers in 1994. Campbell, they say, is a biased observer, known for diagnosing sick-building syndrome and other maladies based on what the airline says is questionable evidence.

And yet, in part because of information gathered by TIME, Southwest has hired an environmental-engineering firm, Air Quality Sciences of Atlanta, to conduct a complete hygiene inspection of the San Antonio center. The building undergoes annual cleanings and monthly inspections, asserts Ginger Hardage, vice president of public relations for Southwest. "We are known as a company that cares for its people," she says.

Employees insist, however, that management has known about the problem for years--and actively concealed it. In 1992 OSHA fined the airline for its failure to maintain complete records of employee illnesses and injuries at the center for each year since 1987, with an additional fine for failing to record descriptions of illnesses and injuries in 80 cases during 1992 alone. According to Hardage, the company has since complied, and the fines have been reduced.

Though some supervisors at the center are said to be sick themselves, employees say these managers have participated in the cover-up. One employee says that her supervisor helped her rewrite her resignation letter, allegedly instructing her to say she "loved the company and was leaving because I wanted to retire," rather than state the real reason, which was her health. That way, she would be able to come back to work if she wanted to. The airline says it knows nothing of this.

Fear of job loss appears to be a key factor in a widespread reluctance among staff members to speak openly about the problem. Many of the center's employees are working mothers afraid of being stranded, like Polansky, without company medical insurance. A 56-year-old male employee, who says he has been sick since he went to work for Southwest in 1992, consulted with his union representative and decided not to speak to TIME on the record; he was afraid going public would get him fired.

An outside inspector who spoke to TIME says a number of workers came up to him during his inspection, telling him about their health problems. "We've never discouraged

communication," maintains Southwest spokeswoman Hardage. Yet the same inspector described efforts on the part of management to get him to alter his report so as to make the building look "less bad." Hardage says this never happened.

Except through the lawsuits that have been filed, most of the sick remain silent; \$20 an hour is hard to find in San Antonio, not to mention profit sharing. "We went over the billion-dollar mark [in revenues] in June of this year," says a long-term employee who has the full array of symptoms, including memory loss and "a thing on my leg." It's "bigger than a silver dollar now," she says. "I just wish they knew how many people in this building are sick."

They do, and it may just close the building. "They said that's the only alternative we've got," says Renee Cicero, local representative for the Air Transport Union. Cicero claims her hands have been tied because no one is filing formal complaints. Then the question will be what to do with the people who are still sick and out of work. "That," says Cicero, "will be another mess."

For further information about sick-building syndrome, contact the EPA's Indoor Air Quality Information Clearing House at 800-438-4318, or visit the agency's website, with links to other indoor-air-quality information websites, at www.epa.gov/iaq.

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