

4-year bedbug scourge linked to pesticide switch in 2001

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lobby for a supervisors' hearing, she said later.

The night-active bugs infest two dozen rooms out of 140 in one decade-old high-rise SRO on Sixth Street, estimates the Central City SRO Collaborative, which is working with the hotel's residents, some of whom have been hospitalized with severe reactions to the bites.

Jarred by the raft of infestations, a bedbug task force consisting of managers from the likes of THC, TNDC, Conard House and Caritas, a subsidiary of Mission Housing Development Corp., was created this year. It meets monthly and shares tips and information, but it hasn't come up with a surefire eradication plan.

Hotels end up paying the treatment costs while tenants pay another price.

'CRAWLING ALL OVER'

"I've got hundreds of bites," says Barbara Lenane from her third-floor room in the Vincent Hotel, a Department of Human Services master-leased SRO at 459 Turk.

"And I'm anemic. This has been going on a year and a half and nothing is working."

Lenane says spraying the room's walls with "alcohol," spreading baking soda around and pest control treatments have changed nothing. She believes that after the man across the hall bagged his infested belongings for treatment and set them in the hallway, bugs escaped to

her room.

"I turn on the light at night and they're crawling all over," the four-year resident says. "Clean, clean, clean, doesn't solve the problem. I've got bites all over my legs. It's horrible! What should we do? There's no closure."

On the second floor, Sidnie Smart, a resident since September, complained to management as soon as she found bugs in her mattress. Her room is scheduled for treatment. Until then, cleaning does no good, she says, and roach motels are useless. "I'm being eaten up by bugs, my arms and legs, and now they're starting on my face."

Lenane and Smart were two of seven Vincent residents who called The Extra in October with their stories.

"Everyone is going nuts fighting this plague."

Herman Taft
TENDERLOIN HOUSING CLINIC

LESSONS LEARNED

Beating the insects is possible, though, as the Altamont Hotel on 16th Street found last year. The lesson came at considerable expense. After a year of tenant complaints about bedbugs, then two years of litigation that won two dozen residents \$150,000, the hotel got clean. Caritas property manager Fred

Doughty told The Extra (see Issue No. 49) that bedbugs had hit the hotel "with a vengeance" and it was difficult and expensive to find an expert pest controller.

"You need for someone to see it (the problem) before it explodes," a wiser Doughty said.

Echoing that is Herman Taft, property supervisor for the Housing Clinic, which operates a dozen master-lease SROs. THC is battling the bugs at its Vincent and Hartland (909 Geary) hotels.

"Reinfestation is so easy," says Taft. "If you handle a problem 99.9%, that's all you need for it to start all over again. Everyone is going nuts fighting this plague."

NO BUG LEFT BEHIND

Experts say the monumental challenge is coordinating several pest control treatments with tenants who must bundle up their belongings for fumigation before vacating their rooms. The process must be flawless. One bug left behind can replay the nightmare, as can a bug riding in on a pants cuff.

The bugs, loving warm weather, can hibernate in cool temperatures for up to a year without feeding, then revive to thrive in hot weather. An unseasonably scorching March 2004 brought more complaints than any month that year. But usually October is the hottest time in San Francisco.

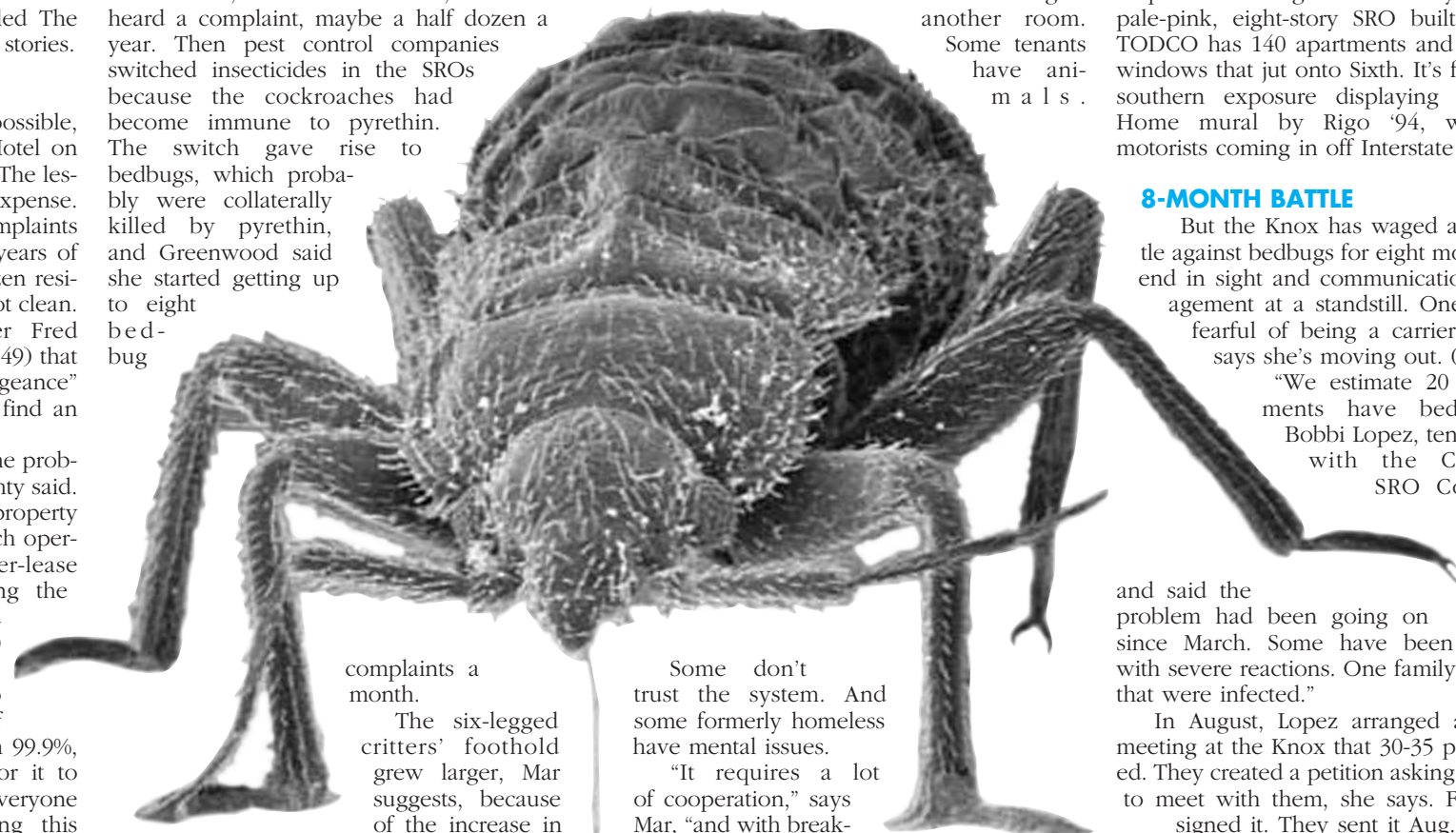
DPH stops short of calling this year an epidemic. But it is no less a problem than it was last year, according to Eric Mar, who handles all sorts of complaints as the department's SRO investigator. "I wouldn't characterize it as an epidemic," he says. "It's not so much disease-spreading as it is an irritant. (The prevalence) is about the same as last year and it does take up a lot of my time. It's quite a problem. And people can get anemic over time (from blood loss)."

Nearly all bedbug complaints come from SROs in TL, SoMa and the Mission. Mar

responds in a day or two and confirms the presence or asks a pest controller to do it. A hotel that doesn't treat an infestation gets cited. If the problem persists, that can lead to a department abatement conference or a hearing. If the well-hidden bugs survive treatments, Mar will return, re-evaluate and suggest that treatments resume. "Not a cheap thing," he says.

ROACHES, NOT BEDBUGS, IMMUNE

Last year, Mar's predecessor on the SRO beat, Jackie Greenwood, pinpointed the rise of bedbugs in the central city at October 2001. Before then, she told The Extra, she seldom heard a complaint, maybe a half dozen a year. Then pest control companies switched insecticides in the SROs because the cockroaches had become immune to pyrethrin. The switch gave rise to bedbugs, which probably were collaterally killed by pyrethrin, and Greenwood said she started getting up to eight bedbug



complaints a month.

The six-legged critters' foothold grew larger, Mar suggests, because of the increase in youth hostels — sites

of the initial complaints. Now, experts say, international travel has fed the resurgence in bedbugs that bedeviled the nation during the Depression until DDT, now outlawed, quelled them in the 1950s.

Treating an infested room takes two or three spraying sessions 10 days apart. The first kills the adults, the second, the eggs. Routinely, a third treatment is for good measure.

The foe is cimex lectularius. Its wide, brown body is ¼-inch long. It can flatten out, slide through paper-thin cracks to hide there, or in bedding, floor boards, carpets, picture frames, molding, even books.

SHELTERS FOIL THE BUGS

Complaints from homeless shelters, once significant, Mar says, tapered off late last year to practically nothing. Shelters switched from wood to metal bed frames with no crevices in which bugs could lodge. Seamless plastic furniture deters them, too.

At night, bedbugs scamper out of dark hiding to find a warm human, animal or bird host. Their bite is not felt because the bug injects a fluid that anesthetizes the incision and causes red welts. The bites later itch, if the host is allergic to the fluid, but people don't know when they are being bitten. Victims think the redness or itching is from mosquitoes or fleas or a rash, and they may not come forward to complain as the biting worsens and the infestation spreads. Or, if they know what's going on, Mar says, some may be too embarrassed over what they feel is the "stigma" to speak up.

A bedbug's five-minute engorgement turns it red. It waddles off to snooze for a few days until an appetite brings it back to the trough. Flies may live a couple of days, but bedbugs live 6-12 months. And a female can lay 500 eggs in a lifetime, hatching after up to 17 days. Unchecked, they multiply rapidly and move

through walls and ceilings like they weren't there.

Great heat and cold kill them. Bedbugs in the clothes of tenants stuffed into plastic bags die in 24 hours in a freezer truck at 20-below zero or sitting in the hot sun a few hours as internal temperature rises to 120 degrees. Hot washing kills them, too.

TENANTS MOSTLY TO BLAME

Tenants are the cause of most failed extermination attempts, Mar says. Three room treatments require the coordinating of schedules, bagging clothes and other possessions, plus the tenant moving to another room.

Some tenants have animals.

The Hartland Hotel, mentioned in The Extra's July 2004 story, fought and won a skirmish with bedbugs last year. Now it's in the throes of war again.

"More is spread people to people than by items," says Mar. But he recalls a case six months ago where an SRO resident bought a used book, brought it home and discovered a blot of cream-colored bedbug eggs in it. In his lectures, Mar cautions tenants to be careful who they invite into their rooms. Backpacks are carriers, he says.

Among the dreary hotels on Sixth Street, the attractive Knox would be among the last to suspect of bedbugs. Bordered by Tehama, the pale-pink, eight-story SRO built in 1994 by TODCO has 140 apartments and 28 large bay windows that jut onto Sixth. It's famous for its southern exposure displaying the Intercity Home mural by Rigo '94, which greets motorists coming in off Interstate 280.

8-MONTH BATTLE

But the Knox has waged a pitched battle against bedbugs for eight months with no end in sight and communication with management at a standstill. One resident, as fearful of being a carrier as a victim, says she's moving out. (See sidebar.)

"We estimate 20 to 25 apartments have bedbugs," says Bobbi Lopez, tenant organizer with the Central City SRO Collaborative.

"Tenants came to us in August

and said the problem had been going on since March. Some have been hospitalized with severe reactions. One family had children that were infected."

In August, Lopez arranged an education meeting at the Knox that 30-35 people attended. They created a petition asking management to meet with them, she says. Fifty residents signed it. They sent it Aug. 8 and asked for a reply by Aug. 15. By the end of October they had heard nothing, Lopez says.

"Now people feel they can't communicate with the new manager," Lopez says. "It has really been a hard process for a lot of people. They just want to be rid of the bugs, they're not trying to extract any money from the hotel."

The Extra called Knox manager Carlos Aznar for comment. He said any complaints are handled "right away." He brusquely asked if this reporter had a complaint and, if so, mail it to him. He wouldn't answer questions about the petition, said he's "not here today," and hung up.

Meanwhile, other SROs such as the handsome seven-story Crescent Manor, next to the Vincent, is feeling the bite and initiating treatments.

'BABY BEDBUGS'

"We've had them here for five years," says Mary Leal, 73, a former nurse from New York, who suffers from various medical conditions. With great effort she complied with the pest control requirements and moved out temporarily. Back in five weeks later, she finds she has "roaches and baby bedbugs." One tenant is suing the hotel and wouldn't discuss the case with The Extra.

But successes are popping up. At the Vincent next door, Louis Arcari thought for the longest time that mosquitoes were at him. At 2 a.m. one night he couldn't stand it anymore and ripped off his sheets.

"They had brought this mattress up from the basement for me and when I pulled the sheets back there was a colony," he says, "a whole line. And they had a smell."

Arcari sat up nights and slept during the day until his room was effectively treated. But

Know the enemy

With three pair of legs, bedbug adults have brownish, 1/4-inch bodies that are a bit on the wide side. They leave bloodstains and dark excrement on sheets and pajamas.

On the skin, saliva from their bite can leave round, irritated and itchy sores in a line or in small circles. But some people aren't allergic to the saliva and the bites don't appear as severe. After a blood meal, the bugs are round and red.

Look for bedbugs in bed frames, mattresses, box springs, under windowsills and table tops, behind curtains and picture frames, in loose molding, books, magazines and floor cracks. Little clumps of clear eggs often are mistaken for dust; they cling to rough surfaces like wood and paper.

A tenant discovering any of these conditions should notify the SRO management immediately. More information about bedbugs is available through the Tenderloin Housing Clinic (774-2427 and the Central City SRO Collaborative (775-7110), which supplied this material. ■

— TOM CARTER

when management took his bed away, it wasn't replaced. Happy to be bug-free, he nevertheless has been sleeping on his linoleum floor for six days, he said.

The Extra called THC's Taft after 5 p.m. to see if he was aware of that.

"Who is it?" asked Taft, a homeless man once in the 1990s. "I'll get him a bed right away."

Within the hour Arcari had a bed. ■



Pestec branch manager Luis Agurto Jr. gets a mattress ready for spraying.

Bloodsuckers but not disease carriers

Freaked out by the bedbug scourge, Knox Hotel resident and S.F. State student Frances Edwards, a fictitious name she prefers, told The Extra in late October she was giving up and leaving town.

Edwards, 45, said she had a few red bites that her doctor could not identify, but said they weren't from fleas or mosquitoes.

"I feel I have to drop out of school and leave town," she said. "I can't handle sitting next to other students knowing I may be carrying bedbugs. It's immoral. The hotel isn't going to handle this. And there are HIV people in here. Will the bedbugs spread that? And what about hepatitis and TB? I'm very shaken up by this."

The Public Health Department says there is "no evidence" that bedbugs spread diseases. Mosquitoes aren't particularly dangerous either. "Theoretically, mosquitoes that spread malaria could spread HIV," Rajiv Bhatia, Environmental Health's medical director says. "But we don't see that pattern. There's no evidence of it." ■

— TOM CARTER



Workers unload previously infested furniture and bedding. The eradication took three days of 20-below zero temperature.