

Don't let the bed bugs bite: A tale of bed bug management in a public library

By Deb Thomas.

Since a bed bug was first reported in one of our library books in September 2011, I've reluctantly developed what one of my colleagues referred to as a "new skill set," another of those skills one doesn't imagine needing when working your way through your master's degree in library studies. I can honestly say that it's one I could have done without but, now that I have this skill, I'm willing to share what I've learned over the past four months – from colleagues, pest management professionals, web searches, and hard experience.

There's a bed bug in my library book! The first sighting

Our first report of a bed bug in one of our books was on September 17, 2011 – a day I am unlikely to forget. A second report followed not long afterward. As all early reports were confined to a particular section of the library (our mystery and thriller sections), we focused our efforts on that section. It soon became clear, however, that the problem was not only in one section of one branch. Toward the end of September, a live bed bug was sighted at our Cameron branch and a subsequent inspection turned up enough potentially affected sections that we were forced to close the library for two days to remove the identified materials and have the shelves steam cleaned.



Pest management staff steam cleans affected shelves. Photo by Burnaby Public Library.

This naturally alerted the media to our situation and we were soon handling multiple requests for statements and interviews.

I never imagined there could be bed bugs in a library! Handling the media

Early on, the Chief Librarian or I responded to every call as it came in with the aim of being as transparent as possible and of getting the facts out about our situation and response. Later, I learned to let media requests go to voice mail so that I could be fully prepared when I called them back. Most stories, thankfully, were reasonably accurate but we were of course occasionally misquoted. A story in a local Burnaby paper about the unfortunate methods some patrons were using to "treat" our books for bed bugs bore the headline "Burnaby Library books being burned, frozen" and led to a follow-up call from another newspaper asking why we were burning books.

We were in regular contact with our Library Board Chair and the Mayor's Office for their recommendations on our approach and to ensure that they were fully informed about what was being reported and what we were doing in response to the issue.

Sniffer dogs and hazmat suits: Inspections and response

After the inspections at the Bob Prittie Metrotown and Cameron branches, we decided to inspect the remaining two branches – even though we had not yet had reports of sightings at those branches. We wanted to be able to say that we had addressed the problem in a thorough manner.

The facilities were inspected by a handler and sniffer dog from our pest management company. Potentially affected books were identified, removed, and set aside for heat treatment. Staff removing the books wore hazmat suits and boot covers to reduce the risk of a bed bug hitchhiker on their clothing. The shelves or furnishings were immediately steam cleaned. Books from all branches were heat treated in a concrete storage room in the parkade of the

Metrotown branch. This meant the temporary loss of several staff parking spaces that were stacked with books, boxed, bagged and tightly secured.



Boxes of books ready for treatment. Photo by Burnaby Public Library.

Books were placed in the storage room which was heated to 50° Celsius for several hours. The books were then set aside for re-inspection seven to 15 days after treatment and finally wiped down and shaken out by staff in hazmat suits, dust masks, and gloves before being returned to the shelves. The boxes and plastic bags used to transport the books were sent for recycling (we checked with the depot first) rather than being re-used.

Can I microwave my books to kill the bed bugs? Informing the public and handling questions and concerns.

By October, we were becoming truly aware of the creative methods our patrons thought they could employ to ensure their borrowed materials did not contain bed bugs. Books with security tags in them came back melted and blackened from their time in someone's microwave. Some were sprayed with pesticides, others placed in freezers and still others warmed in ovens. Sadly, we had to inform our patrons that none of these methods was guaranteed to be effective and some were downright dangerous. Our pest management company recommended keeping the books in sealed plastic bags or containers when they are not being read. Since bed bugs prefer a passive host (that is, sleeping), they are unlikely to emerge while the book is being read – and will be visible if they do.

Staff members were advised to answer patron concerns as calmly and honestly as possible and to refer any difficult questions to their supervisors or branch managers. To assist them in responding to questions and to better inform the public, we created a page on our website with answers to most often asked questions -

<http://www.bpl.bc.ca/news/bedbug-faqs> - as well as a paper handout (Bed Bug Basics) with the same information, including links to reliable information about bed bugs. The paper versions are available in English, Chinese, Korean and Punjabi while the online version links to information from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in English, Chinese, Korean, Spanish and Russian.

What do I do with the squished bug? Informing and training staff

One of the more difficult tasks early on was ensuring that everyone who needed to know information about the bed bug issue was appropriately informed. At first, we were only informing those directly involved in a task – whether it be booking an inspection, responding to an inspection, talking to the media, etc. – in part because we as senior management were still deep in the learning process ourselves and were busy handling each new issue as it arose. We quickly realized, however, that staff wanted both the bigger picture *and* the details of their particular tasks.

We posted regular updates on our Staff Web, including links where possible to the articles in the media so that front line staff could know what was being said and clarify if necessary with patrons. We also created a folder on our common network drive in which our management plan, protocols, and inspection reports were all kept, and informed all staff of its contents and location. A section of our staff web is dedicated to bed bugs and contains links to all of the documents in the folder on our common drive. Supervisors are encouraged to hold crew talks to share information and hear about questions and concerns. And, finally, on November 30th, we closed all branches for a few hours and held an information session for all staff that included a comprehensive talk by a representative of Vancouver Coastal Health on the history of bed bugs in North America, the current situation in the Lower Mainland, identification tips, and precautions to prevent the spread of bed bugs, a review of the protocols, and a review of the management plan.

More than two-thirds of our 250 staff members were able to attend and many commented afterward that they felt less stressed and better informed. Staff

has, overall, stepped up in exemplary fashion – reporting and responding to sightings, handling the concerns of the public and the interest of the media, and assisting with the removal of identified items after inspection.



Preparing to battle bed bugs. Photo by Burnaby Public Library.

Are the bed bugs gone? Ongoing management

I have noted above a few of the tools we've created to assist in ongoing management – such as our Bed Bug Management Plan and our Bed Bug Protocols. One of the most critical tools to assisting us in reducing further occurrences of bed bugs in the library is our Bed Bug Log. Located on the shared library drive, it's a place where all staff members are encouraged to record bed bug sightings in the library or in borrowed materials and reports by patrons of bed bugs in their homes or buildings. Senior management (the Chief Librarian and I) have committed to checking it regularly and responding promptly.

The most useful bed bug identification sites we've found are from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

- Is it a bed bug? (New York)
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/bedbugs/downloads/pdf/is-it-a-bedbug.pdf>
- Bed bug identification checklist (New York)
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/bedbugs/html/basics/bed-bug-id.shtml>

We are planning inspections of all four branches in mid-January to follow up on the fall inspections and give us a clear benchmark to establish the frequency of future inspections of our facilities and our delivery trucks. In between inspections, we are using

monitoring devices in item return areas and depending on the Bed Bug Log to alert us to new occurrences. Every branch and department has been provided with equipment such as a sealable plastic bags to contain materials suspected of containing bed bugs, lint rollers to check clothing for bed bugs before heading home, and grout brushes for cleaning shoes as you leave work or, for our Home Library Service staff, when they return from delivering materials to people's homes. Our Building Service Worker staff members also have dust masks and heavy-duty plastic bags (for bagging boxes of identified books). We have also purchased a steam cleaner for in-house cleaning of shelving or furnishings where bed bugs have been sighted or found by a sniffer dog.

When creating the Bed Bug Management Plan and the Protocols, we borrowed heavily from policies and procedures shared with us by Vancouver Public Library and Toronto Public Library – and we have returned the favour by sharing with other libraries in the Lower Mainland. Both are living documents and have been revised several times since they were created. We have recently added a section, for example, that outlines a quarantine process for collection areas where a bed bug has been sighted. This process allows us to remove the books immediately after a sighting and hold them in an area away from public and staff areas until there is a sufficient quantity for an inspection by the sniffer dog – and it ensures that possibly affected collections don't circulate to other borrowers in the meantime. This approach was recommended strongly by both City Risk Management and our pest management company.

While we are very conscious that, as long as bed bugs can still be found in the Lower Mainland, it is probable they will be reintroduced into Burnaby Public Library on clothing or in borrowed materials, we are confident that we are doing everything we know to do to minimize the risk to staff and patrons. And we continue to actively seek new information that will make the steps we are taking to manage the problem even more effective.

Though it has been expensive and at times very stressful, I am proud of us for taking this approach. Our activity levels have naturally taken a hit in the past few months and it's possible some of our borrowers will restrict themselves to e-books in future, but I believe that being proactive, transparent and having a solid management plan will ultimately reassure our patrons and our staff that we are facing

the problem and doing everything we can to ensure that materials from the library are bed bug free.

Other links we have found valuable in keeping us and the public fully informed:

- Vancouver Coastal Health on bed bugs
http://www.vch.ca/your_environment/pest_management/bed_bugs/
- Health Link BC on bed bugs
<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile95.stm>
- BC Ministry of Health
<http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/protect/bed-bugs.html>
- IdentifyUS <http://identify.us.com/index.html>
- A Code of Practice for the Control of Bed Bug Infestations in Australia
<http://medent.usyd.edu.au/bedbug/>
- Bed Bug Fact Sheet (Australia)
http://medent.usyd.edu.au/bedbug/bed_bugs_factsheet.pdf

*Deb Thomas is Deputy Chief Librarian,
Burnaby Public Library, and Branch Manager,
Bob Prittie Metrotown Branch in Burnaby, B.C.*



Good-bye to bed bugs. Photo by Burnaby Public Library.