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Worker ills**from 'sick'****buildings?**From Medical Writer
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SYDNEY — As many as half Australia's offices, hospitals and other air-conditioned buildings may be suffering from the "sick building syndrome", a US bacteriologist-chemist claimed yesterday.

Mr Gray Robertson, who founded the world's first company specialising in cleaning up "sick" air-conditioning systems, said dangerous microbes, fumes and pollutants clogging up faulty air-conditioning systems caused sore eyes, allergies, fatigue, cold or flu-like illnesses, headaches and general respiratory problems.

He was speaking at a seminar on environmental tobacco smoke organised by the Tobacco Institute of Australia in Sydney yesterday.

He said his company, ACVA Atlantic Inc. of Virginia, had found that up to 50 p.c. of worker absenteeism was due to upper respiratory problems — common symptoms in "sick buildings".

The presence of tobacco smoke in a building was only one of the tell-tale symptoms of indoor pollution.

The introduction of smoking bans in buildings would not solve the real problems which were caused by poor ventilation, he said.

His studies had shown the presence of at least 27 different species of bacteria in public buildings and hospitals as well as fungi — 50 p.c. of which caused allergies.

"The first fatal epidemic of legionnaire's disease alerted the world to the problem," he said.

"Lesser outbreaks of cold or flu-like illnesses occur in the workplace but the source is rarely identified and in many cases it is the building itself."

"Sick buildings smell stuffy, stale and dusty and have high worker absenteeism rates."

"The 'microbial soup' that exists in the air-conditioning ducts in some hospitals is worse than that to be found in a chicken coop."

Fumes and chemicals from photocopiers, computers and other machines were overlooked, he said. Ducts were perfect incubators and the situation was made worse by companies and government departments under pressure to cut costs by using cheaper filters and energy conservation programs which made greater use of recycled air.

"All the legionnaires outbreaks and the increase in sick buildings around the world increased when the cost of oil started going up," Mr Robertson said.

He said 64 p.c. of US buildings had poor ventilation because of the way their air systems functioned, 38 p.c. had contaminated duct work and 35 p.c. had shut off fresh air to conserve heating or

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