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KNBC Investigation: Moldy Business

POSTED: 3:26 pm PST November 27, 2007
UPDATED: 6:21 am PST November 28, 2007

LOS ANGELES -- You've probably seen mold growing somewhere in your home or apartment, maybe in your bathroom or your kitchen.

Video

Have you ever wondered if it's dangerous? KNBC Investigative Reporter Joel Grover uncovered some companies that seem to be preying on our worst fears about mold.

It's growing in every Southern California neighborhood: on ceilings, in drawers, under kitchen sinks. It's mold, and for most of us, it's usually harmless. But a KNBC investigation documented on hidden camera some businesses willing to tell undercover homeowners, "It's toxic," and offer to remove mold that doesn't even exist.

"I call them predators," said Brian Daly a well-known industrial hygienist with Hygiene Technologies International.

He helped with KNBC's investigation. Daly and his team tested a Los Angeles area home for mold by taking moisture tests and samples from inside the walls, the surfaces and the air throughout the house.

All they found was just a trace of common mildew and only in the bathroom drawers.

"Do we have a mold problem in that house?" Grover asked Daly.

"No. There was no mold growth problem," he replied.

Then, KNBC's expert suggests we put a bit of black eye shadow on the bathroom wall as a way to test mold removal companies.

"Shouldn't a mold expert know the difference between eye shadow and mold?" Grover asked Daly.

"Yes of course," he replied.

Next, KNBC installed hidden cameras in the test house to see what mold removal companies would say about the bathroom.

When KNBC called Big Valley Carpet Care, a technician named Shawn showed up, looked at that eye shadow, and immediately told an undercover producer, "That's a toxic mold. Do you see how black it is?"



He also claims there's mold inside the vanity.

"The vanity is going to have to come out, the mirror. Then we have to open the wall, get rid of all the infected drywall," Shawn tells the undercover producer.

"Can an expert tell that it's dangerous toxic mold just by looking?" Grover asked Daly.

"No. Tests must be done," he replied.

Daly says industry standards recommend testing in most instances.

But without doing tests, Shawn's crew hauls in a big machine to cleanse the air.

"Do we need to sample the mold?" the undercover producer asked Shawn.

"No. (It's) another \$450 for the test. That's a waste of money," he replied.

The next company that shows up is Servpro, a big name in mold removal. Their agent, Marvin Zarou, takes a quick look at the bathroom.

"If I told you I was getting headaches, what would you think?" the undercover producer asks Zarou.

He tells the undercover producer she's got a big problem inside the vanity. "It smells musty," Zarou says. KNBC's expert found no mold there.

"The mold I see is black, and when it's black, it's bad," Zarou tells the undercover producer. He too says there's no need to do any testing.

"I see it. So why you want to test it?" Zarou tells the KNBC undercover producer. He wants to demolish the entire bathroom to get rid of the mold.

"We'll remove everything inside this bathroom," Zarou tells the undercover producer.

KNBC showed the undercover tape of Zarou to the expert Brian Daly.

"It feels like a contractor taking advantage of a homeowner," Daly tells KNBC.

But the price tag got even bigger, nearly \$3,000 when KNBC called in Tiptop Restoration.

The owner Rony Hani looked at the eye shadow, and said, "This is mold."

"How many times you clean it, more than once?" Hani asked.

"Two times. It keeps coming back," the undercover producer replied.

"This is mold and it's toxic too," Hani said about the harmless mildew in the drawers.

At first, He suggests some tests. "We going to do what's called environmental inspection," Hani tells the undercover producer. But then he says the undercover producer doesn't have to do the tests.

"I recommend it, but you don't have to do it if you want to save the money for testing. It's like \$430," Hani says.

Hani tells the undercover producer that he's sure the bathroom is full of dangerous mold. "Don't use this bathroom. Keep the door closed," he says.

An hour later, Hani's crew brings in rolls of plastic and seals off the bathroom to tear it apart.

The undercover producer tells them maybe they should first do tests, but Hani's coworker says that's unnecessary. "I can tell you that you have mold. You want to pay me \$400? I tell you 'Yes, you have mold,'" the coworker tells the undercover producer.

"You want to bring in a guy to test it? I told you also, it's a waste of money. That's exactly what I said," Hani tells the undercover producer.

KNBC showed the undercover tape to expert Brian Daly. "How would you characterize what you've seen in the tape?" Grover asked Daly.

"It's a rip-off, there is nothing wrong with this place, this work is not necessary," Daly replies.

Other homeowners tell KNBC that it's happened to them too with other companies. "You're scared and your frightened and you think oh it's there," says Lea Wallace. She says she spent thousands on unnecessary mold removal in her bathroom.

"They tore this whole area out for nothing," Wallace tells KNBC.

"It's simple. Scare the homeowner, make some money," Daly tells KNBC.

But what about the mold removal companies KNBC caught on tape? How would they explain the statements they made?

Can't you tell the difference between women's eye makeup and dangerous mold," Grover asked Rony Hani with Tiptop Restoration. "No, no. Not before I bring in the company to do that testing," Hani replied.

"You were encouraging her to rip up that wall before any testing was done," Grover asked Hani.

"No, no," Hani replied.

But remember the hidden camera tape: "You want to bring in a guy to test it? I told you also, it's a waste of money," Hani told the KNBC undercover producer.

"It seems like you were trying to make an easy buck off her," Grover asked Hani.

"No, not even a chance. OK? Not even a chance," Hani replied.

By phone, Hani later told KNBC he was wrong to say it was toxic mold, but that it was an honest mistake. Shawn from Big Valley also told KNBC the same thing. The owner of Big Valley says Shawn is just a subcontractor for him and he takes no responsibility for whatever Shawn said at the home.

As for Servpro (see statement below), they say they're not responsible for Marvin Zarou's conduct because he works for a franchisee, Servpro of Bel Air.

Tips From Experts:

So what can you do if you think you have dangerous mold in your home? Dr. Owen Seiver and Dr. John

Schillinger of the Cal State Northridge Department Environmental and Occupational Health suggest:

- Remember that mold cannot grow without moisture. Look for sources of moisture in your home: Leaks under the sink, sprinklers hitting the outside of a home, air conditioning condensation.
- If you think you might have a mold problem, hire an independent mold testing company to find out. Hire a company that only does testing, not mold removal or remediation too, so there's no conflict of interest. Ask the background of the person doing the testing (ask if they have a science background in environmental health and/or industrial hygiene).
- If a testing company says you do have a mold problem, get several estimates for work from different remediation companies.
- To find the names of reputable mold testing and remediation companies, you might ask experienced real estate agents from established realty agencies.

Statement From ServPro

Servpro Industries, Inc. is a national franchisor of over 1,400 franchises offering fire, water and disaster cleaning, mitigation and restoration services. From isolated incidents of water and smoke in residences and commercial properties to disasters from tornadoes, earthquakes and wild fires, Servpro franchisees serve their customers tirelessly, 24 hours each day. Hundreds of insurance companies recommend Servpro to thousands of their insureds each year. Each Servpro franchisee is independently owned and operated. Servpro provides training to each franchisee on applicable industry standards and practices, including those published by the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration (IICRC).

Numerous variables may be present in different water or mold incidents and property owners may not know the extent or the length of time water or mold was present. As a result, each restoration professional must exercise his or her judgment when making remediation recommendations. Each restoration professional should always keep the health and safety of the customer uppermost when making his or her recommendations. This is because many health care professionals believe exposure to mold may cause health problems, particularly in the young, those with allergies and those with compromised immune systems. If property owners have questions or concerns about recommendations made by restoration professionals, it would be a good idea to contact a certified indoor air quality specialist and/or their physicians.

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