Risk Management

by Raymond C. Ellis, Jr.

Meth labs in hotels pose a dangerous and significant challenge

In recent years, a do-it-yourself drug has entered the American drug culture. Methamphetamine is a psychoactive stimulant drug that poses a unique challenge for hotels because the manufacturing environs are somewhat ubiquitous in society. The drug can be manufactured (or "cooked") almost anywhere where there is a contained environment free from public observation, such as basements, apartments, RVs in remote locations, rental cabins, and certainly hotel rooms.

What to watch for

Also known as "meth," "crank," "speed," "ice," "chalk", "shabu," or "crystal," this is a drug that can be manufactured from consumer products, cleaning chemicals, and over-the-counter medications that are easy to legally obtain. These potential ingredients include:

- Acetone or nail polish remover
- Alcohol (isopropyl or rubbing)
- Anhydrous ammonia (fertilizer)
- Ephedrine (cold medications)
- Ether (engine starter)
- Hydrochloric acid (pool supply)
- Iodine (flakes or crystal)
- Kitty litter
- Lithium (batteries)
- Methanol (gasoline additive)
- MSM (Nutritional supplement)
- Pseudoephedrine (cold medications)
- Red phosphorus (matches or road flares)
- Salt (table or rock)
- Sodium hydroxide (lye)
- Sodium metal
- Sulfuric acid (drain cleaner)
- Toluene (brake cleaner)
- Trichloroethane (gun cleaner)

Combine these ingredients with easily obtained equipment (listed below) and the illegal drug production is practically on its way. All the "cooker" needs to find is a solitary, quiet location where he will be undisturbed from outsiders as he manufactures this highly addictive and extremely unstable chemical concoction. Since the above products when combined are highly toxic, explosive and a dangerous fire source, the selection of a site for a "meth lab" is anywhere but in one's living quarters. Unfortunately, all too often, the selection for the "lab" is a lodging site such as a hotel room or resort rental cabin.

- Aluminum foil
- Pails and buckets
- Blenders
- Paper towels

- Cheesecloth
- Plastic storage containers
- Clamps
- Propane cylinders
- Coffee filters
- Rubber gloves
- Funnels
- Rubber tubing
- Gas cans strain
- Strainers
- Ice chests
- Tape
- Jugs and bottles
- Tempered glassware
- Laboratory
- Thermometer
- Beakers and glassware
- Towels and bed sheets
- Measuring cups

Meth "cookers" teach an average of ten others in a year how to manufacture the drug, so there is no dearth of knowledge or lack of willing workers to replace those that have quit due to injury, death, or arrest. Most Meth labs are "portable" so they can be quickly relocated once outsiders (i.e., Police, rival drug traffickers, users) learn the location of the lab and make it untenable for production to continue. The portable nature of the labs makes it difficult for Police to obtain a search warrant for the legal bust of a Meth lab location, and immediate access to ingredients and equipment makes it easy for the cookers and dealers to roam free, able to spread this poison.

Identifying potential "cookers"

When a potential "lab operator" approaches a hotel or resort front desk to register, there may be some tell-tale signs of the individual's real intention for contracting a guestroom or cabin, especially if the cooker is also a "user" (addict). There will be scabs and sores on the face and arms and the individual may be scratching at his/her body while registering. The teeth are likely to be rotting (this is known as "meth mouth"), and there will be poor grooming and dilated pupils with redness on the iris. Generally, the individual will be abnormally thin as users tend to experience significant weight loss.

In addition to the physical appearance there are some significant behavioral warnings. The individual may be an incessant talker and very nervous, anxious, and fidgety. The person may also be very argumentative and irritable.

During the registration, the individual will usually pay cash, present a local address, and provide no identification. The registration will normally be at strange hours so as to avoid other registrants, or at times when senior management or supervisory personnel are not present.

Of course, if the individual registering for the guestroom is seen transporting many of the aforementioned ingredients and supplies onto hotel property, it is pretty safe to assume that their intention is not rest and relaxation but rather some illegal endeavor.

Did you know?

Missouri led all states with 1,471 reported clandestine meth lab incidents in 2008. This was followed by Indiana at 724, Tennessee at 553, Kentucky at 416, and California at 346. Connecticut, Delaware, Rhode Island, Hawaii and the District of Columbia reported no clandestine meth lab incidents for 2008.

Source: National Clandestine Laboratory Database, U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency

Policies and procedures

There are several potential hotel policies that Management can consider enacting to prevent the registration of the "meth addict" or "cooker". Hoteliers should review with legal counsel interpretation of the discretion allowed to the innkeeper under local and state Innkeeper Laws, or other local regulations which permit refusal of registration. One policy would be to deny registration to any guest that presents a local address, perhaps within 50 miles of the hotel's location. Rarely do guests who reside nearby need hotel accommodations.

Another policy that could screen out potential meth lab registrants is the requirement that housekeeping or management personnel must enter every guestroom at least once within every 24-hour period for health and sanitation reasons. Remember, "cookers" and "users" alike want their complete privacy to

carry on their illicit activities. If they know that they will likely be disturbed, they will select some other nearby property to "set up shop". Even though most meth labs are portable, incessantly removing or hiding evidence of their illegal activities is not a desirable option for meth lab operators. If at all possible, it would be advantageous to have a local health and sanitation authority mandate this policy for all lodging establishments in its jurisdiction.

Finally, if appropriate to your property, institute a "no cooking" and "no open flame" policy in your guestrooms. Most guests will think you are mandating no culinary activities, no candles and no incense inside hotel rooms, and not referring to Bunsen burners and beakers. Regardless, implementing such a policy gives Management greater latitude for inspecting guestrooms or requesting police intervention when strange odors or unusually high energy consumption occurs in a specific guestroom.

Dealing with cleanup

In spite of your best efforts, a "meth lab" team can still turn one of your guestrooms into a "lab". They can be up and producing "meth products" within four hours; so the "Do Not Disturb" sign would be valid for at least another twenty hours. Although towels will be placed on the floor at the door and the balance of the door will be taped, the penetrating odor of "dirty diapers' will most likely be present. Visitors arriving in late evening and early morning hours may be a tip-off. Usually, the lab will produce product for use by the individual with sales of at least enough to afford another "batch." Once there is no further immediate demand for the drug by buyers, the lab operators will vacate the property quickly and discretely, leaving behind an unsightly mess.

When a housekeeper finally enters the room, it will be in chaotic condition. The room will have been literally trashed. Wastebaskets will be filled to overflowing and bedding and towels will have been effectively destroyed. Evidence of the ingredients used to cook the meth will be laying everywhere and the room will reek of pungent and putrid odors.

It is imperative to train staff members that if they open the door to the remains of a "lab" they should not enter the room, but should immediately close the door and secure the room. This is a situation where the Hazmat unit for the community should be called. Police and Drug Enforcement Administration should also be called. They will handle the investigation and provide details of how to proceed to remediate the guestroom. Unfortunately clean-up can cost from $2,000 to $20,000 and should always be performed by specially trained and equipped outside personnel. Usually, it is a high-end cost.

The critical reason for keeping employees out of the room is exposure to the toxic chemicals that were used to produce the drug. These pose a variety of health risks, including in-toxication, dizziness, nausea, disorientation, lack of coordin-ation, pulmonary edema, serious respiratory problems, severe chemical burns, and damage to internal organs. Inhaling chemical vapors and gases resulting from methamphetamine production causes shortness of breath, coughing and chest pain. Exposure to these vapors and gases may also cause intoxication, dizziness, nausea, dis-orientation, lack of coordination, pulmonary edema, chemical pneumonitis, and other serious respiratory problems when absorbed into the body through the lungs. Also, if the skin comes into contact with any of the chemicals or chemical residue, severe burns can result.

Toxic chemicals can be ingested either by consuming conta-minated food or beverages or by inadvertently consuming the chemicals directly. Ingesting toxic chemicals – or methamphetamine itself – may result in potentially fatal poisoning, internal chemical burns, damage to organ function, and harm to neurological and immunologic functioning.

For these reasons, employees must be forbidden from entering the room, even momentarily. This is definitely a situation where only pro-fessional decontamination and remediation personnel should be involved. The typical decon-tamination and clean-up process is outlined in the adjacent box. ✧

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Meth lab cleanup process

Following is a simple outline of the basic process. The procedure may differ by state or even by county. Consult your state or local health department for details.

1. Following law enforcement seizure, bulk chemicals, containers, and other paraphernalia are removed from the site.

2. A government health agency declares the property unsafe for entry and posts a notice at the site.

3. Typically, a professional health and safety inspector or consultant assesses the site to determine extent of contamination and to create a cleanup plan. Some contaminants, including solvents, metals, salts, and corrosives, will remain on surfaces as well as in furniture, carpeting, drains, and HVAC systems and cause serious personal risk. The contamination can even extend to outside the structure as every pound of meth produced generates five or more pounds of hazardous waste. This waste is often tossed onto the ground, flushed down toilets, or dumped into drains. This creates dangerously contaminated soil, septic tanks and drain fields, and surface water.

4. An appropriately trained/certified cleanup contractor is called in to perform cleaning in areas designated by the plan and to dispose of hazardous material appropriately.

5. The inspector/consultant re-assesses after cleanup to determine if the site meets state cleanup criteria. This is achieved by visual inspection and by taking wipe samples for laboratory analysis.

6. If the site does not meet cleanup standards, the cleanup contractor returns to re-clean. Confirmatory wipe sampling is performed as many times as it takes for the site to meet cleanup standards. Once the site complies, the health agency will issue a certificate of re-occupancy.

Source: www.methwipe.com/facts.html