FROM DETECTION TO DIRECTION: HANDLING EM ISOLATES WITH CONFIDENCE

Vanessa Vasadi Figueroa, Chief Microbiologist, VVF Science®, United States

Understanding microbes present at both the quantitative and qualitative levels is invaluable for building a comprehensive contamination control strategy (CCS). When determining whether to perform microbial identifications beyond the mandatory requirements, companies must balance regulatory guidance, risk management, and data-driven internal processes.

General Approach to Microbial Identification

Here are some considerations to offer clients that are beginning their journey for EM isolate management.

Frequency & Location

- Prioritize isolates recovered from Grades A and B environments and have a rationale for those from Grades C and D environments.
- Consider recurring organisms from same location/operator over time are more relevant, as well as infrequent organisms.
- Include all organisms found on critical surfaces (e.g., filling needles, stopper bowls, operator gloves) and from aseptic media filling failures.

Potential to Impact Product Quality

- Choose isolates that may pose higher contamination risk: spore formers, biofilm formers, Gram-negative rods for routine surveillance.
- Use knowledge of product types to guide selection: for sterile injectables, consider low-level grade negative organisms that may be more critical if found in the environment; for non-sterile products, evaluate what is considered objectionable.

Microbial Diversity

- Include a range of Gram-positive, Gram-negative, yeast, and mold organisms that are representative within the facility. These should generally be the most predominant isolates but can also include dissimilar organisms too.
- Ensure you don't bias validation studies by testing only cleanroom organisms, as compendial guidance chapters require certain qualified organisms too.

Regulatory & Industry Expectation

- Be ready to justify isolate selection during a regulatory inspection, showing connection to a site's CCS and real data captured from routine EM.
- Encourage clients to show linkage between routine monitoring results, isolate retention, storage and management, as well as control strategies.

Contact us to learn more:
+1.320.253.7400
info@microbiologics.com

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Specific Approach for Aseptic Manufacturing

More concrete guidance to offer clients that are mature in their journey for EM isolate management, and those in regulated aseptic manufacturing environments such as EU Annex 1.

Grade A & B Environments:

- Identify all isolates from critical cleanroom areas, including alert or action level excursions and adverse trends. Identification should be performed to the species level (where feasible).
- Include results that were isolated from critical personnel, particularly gloves and sleeves, to monitor potential contamination sources from their aseptic techniques and behaviors.

Grade C & D Environments:

- Identify isolates from all action level results.
- Identify alert level trends, which are indicative of a shift in contamination rate or breakdown of cleanroom controls. These should be the most predominant organisms and representative (not every single organism needs identification).
- Identification to genus or species level depends on risk to the process or product and should be justified.

Product and Process-Related Events

- Identify all organisms recovered from sterility test failures, aseptic process simulations (media fills), and any process-related bioburden failures.
- Identification to species level is strongly recommended to support root cause investigations and corrective action planning.
- Maintain a robust management program where isolates from product failures can be stored, and reintegrated to other processes and validations, as needed.

Critical Utilities (Product contacting)

- Isolates from utility systems such as Water for Injection (WFI), Purified Water (PW), and clean compressed gases must be identified when bioburden levels exceed Action levels or show significant Alert level trends.
- Species-level identification is recommended to evaluate recurrence, source attribution (e.g., biofilm), and potential impact on product contact surfaces.

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