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This home came with a funny smell

January 13, 2012

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Four years ago, Wanda Bourdages bought her first home in Saskatoon, taking possession on May 1, 2008. Soon after taking ownership, Wanda noticed a very powerful odour coming from the basement. It turned out that a board was blocking an unused coal chute and behind the board, in the chute was a foul-smelling black mould. When Bourdages visited the house with her agent before making an offer, she didn't detect any unusual odours.

A few months later, Bourdages did what she thought was a minor renovation in the bathroom. The contractor found that the sub-floor was rotten, with more black mould. In the end it cost Bourdages more than \$8,000 to get rid of the mould in both places.

She sued the seller and her real estate agent for the cost of the repairs in a case decided last spring. Her main contention was that the seller knew about these problems and should have disclosed them and her agent should have protected her. On the surface it seems she had a good case, but the judge ruled against her.

In court, Bourdages couldn't prove the seller knew about these problems. Had she removed the board during the initial inspection of the home, she would probably have found the mould. The agent recommended that she have the home inspected, but she chose not to spend the money.

Wanda told the court that the agent said it was a sweet deal and she could double her money with little effort, and thus pressured her into buying. The judge disagreed, saying there was no proof that the agent pressured her to do anything.

Funny smells can be as important as visual defects when you inspect a home. Leaking natural gas can smell like a skunk. A rotten egg smell could be an indication of rotting drywall behind the walls. Urine odours may not just be a pet stain, but could also mean there are raccoons in the attic. Burning rubber smell could mean an appliance or an electrical outlet is overheated, and could lead to a fire. If it smells like mushrooms, it could also be mould.

Owners may not notice these odours if they build up over time. They get used to them. Some home inspectors will use specially trained dogs to detect these odours, as there is usually no visible evidence that you can point to.

I have had many buyers claim that during the initial home inspection, the basement had just been freshly painted and the sellers explained that this was why they had fans operating. Or the reason for the fans was because of the humidity in the house. Problems with mould were discovered soon after closing. Other examples of sellers trying to cover up bad smells or other similar problems could be new baseboards in some of the rooms, especially the basement or perhaps over the garage.

Many agents will recommend that air fresheners be used throughout the house before open houses. Be careful that this is not being done to cover something up.

If you are selling your home and you know about some strange odours, don't try to cover them up. Find out whether there is a problem by calling in a professional, and then fix it before you put your home up for sale. If you are buying any home, especially older ones, consider additional environmental inspections that can detect hidden odour problems, and be very wary when you notice very recent renovations or painting that was done. They may have been done deliberately to cover up a problem.

Being properly [prepared when you inspect a home](#) should save you unnecessary aggravation later.

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Toronto Star/Jim Rankin