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DOH releases study on LOOW, NFFS cancer incidences

by Terry Duffy

Lewiston Porter Sentinel, September 20, 2008

The New York Department of Health released its long-awaited cancer study findings of residents, Lew-Port students and district employees situated near the hazardous waste and municipal dump operations of the Lake Ontario Ordnance Area, the highly radioactive contaminated Niagara Falls Storage Site on Pletcher Road. Requested by area citizen groups and the Niagara County Health Department, both of which had raised concerns at an earlier Ransomville session over high incidences of cancers, and a purported link to those in proximity to LOOW and the NFFS, the study overall in essence did not draw any direct links.

Prepared under the direction of Aura Weinstein, director of the DOH Cancer Surveillance Program, it did find some reporting higher than expected cases in a number of studies.

But overall, it concluded the heightened cancer incidences were linked to other factors. "The possibility that the cancers were the result of chance cannot be ruled out," the DEC summarized.

The study examined three areas – those living near, attending or working at the Lew-Port School District; those living near LOOW and living in zip codes 14174 (Youngstown) and 14131 (Ransomville) and the northeastern areas in the Ransomville zip code downwind from CWM. Numbers were extrapolated from actual cancer cases in the years 1995-2000 from the New York State Cancer Registry (observed number); from calculating the number of people in the aforementioned areas expected to have been diagnosed with cancer, based on age (calculated number), data from children, and the type of cancer found.

Mixed Bag

For those who initially aired concerns at the Ransomville session over the prevalence of cancers in areas neighboring the CWM Chemical Services LLC, the results present a mixed bag as DOH's findings appear to be inclusive or even supportive of other concerns.

For study area No. 1 – Lew-Port – DOH found a total of 702 cancers in males versus 614 expected and commercial difference was "statistically significant" – i.e., "It was unlikely to occur by chance." But it also reported 590 cancers in females versus 565 expected, and opined the number "could be the result of random variation."

It found 15 cancers in children versus eight expected in study area No. 1. But in its analysis, DOH both offered comfort to those afflicted with 12 variations of cancers, and downplayed its concerns over the numbers of those suffering from lymphomas and other cancers. "The numbers of these were within the range we would expect to find," wrote DOH.

Not Significant

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In study area No. 2 – Youngstown and Ransomville zip codes – DOH reported 334 cancers in males, versus 311 cancers in females, versus 270 expected; and six cancers in children versus five expected. When considering while finding, for example, that prostate cancers among males were “statistically higher,” DOH also found others women and children in those zip codes were not “statistically significant.”

And in area No. 3 – Ransomville zip code – DOH reported 160 cancers in males, versus 155 expected; 118 cancers versus 135 expected; and fewer than six diagnosed cancers of children. All three were deemed to be “not significant from the number expected.”

Following concerns of Ransomville residents on the results from an earlier study in 1995-99, which found numbers of cancers, such as bladder cancers in males, to be “significantly greater” than expected, and “closer” to expected in females, the latest DEC findings, when broken down to consider “all types of cancer,” appeared to be somewhat and inconclusive. In fact DOH varied from its earlier assessment when stating it did not “confirm the statistically high number of total cancers in males” and that bladder cancer numbers in Ransomville “was closer to the number expected.”

DOH concluded it “found no unusual cancer patterns” both for the Youngstown-Ransomville zip codes and the Ransomville zip code in the latest study, excluding prostate, but reported “statistically high numbers of several of including prostate in the Lew-Port area study.

Exposure Link Downplayed

But still, DOH in its overall determinations failed to shed much light on linking cancer sustained from exposures from the three aforementioned study areas. The issue of exposure was a primary argument for calls of additional DOH clarification from the earlier Ransomville session, particularly with regards to the safety of those in study No. 1 – Lew-Port. “We cannot conclude that these higher numbers were related to exposures from any contaminants from the sites, because we don't know enough about where these individuals went to school or other possible risk they may have had.”

And again it concluded, “the result of chance cannot be ruled out.”

DOH announced it will be holding a public meeting Monday, Sept. 29, at the Lewiston-Porter High School auditorium to discuss its findings. The time of the session is from 7 to 9 p.m. DOH reps will be on hand and residents are encouraged to attend.

For further information, contact Weinstein at 518-474-2354.

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