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Eight cancer clusters discovered in Delaware

10 percent to 45 percent more cases in those areas than rest of state, study finds

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Residents of eight areas in Delaware get cancer at abnormally high rates, state public health officials concluded in a study to be made public today.

The cancer clusters comprise large swaths of Delaware's landscape, upstate from Wilmington to New Castle and from Bear to Glasgow and Middletown, as well as Kenton and Millsboro downstate. Roughly four in 10 Delawareans live in areas with cancer clusters, according to the findings.

Though Delaware residents have long gotten cancer and died from it at rates above the national average, the new study is the first statewide look for pockets of Delaware's second-leading killer behind heart disease.

Cancer incidence -- the rate at which victims get the disease -- was 10 percent to 45 percent higher in those regions than the average for the entire state. Some clusters were identified only for specific types of cancer -- prostate, lung or colorectal -- but five of the areas exhibited clusters of "all cancer combined." The cases studied were diagnosed between 2000 and 2004, the most recent period for which reliable state data is available.

The report, which has been given to all 62 members of the General Assembly, grew out of a study last summer that focused on several ZIP codes around the Indian River electricity plant near Millsboro, and discovered a lung cancer cluster. A public outcry followed the report, blaming pollution from the coal-powered plant, and some residents speculated that other areas also had clusters. So state officials decided to see if more clusters existed.

The report released today makes no attempt to identify the causes of the clusters. It said possible causes include environmental pollution along with smoking and other unhealthy lifestyle choices. Another factor could be that doctors have diagnosed more cases of cancer because of better patient access to screening. There is a small chance that the findings could be due to coincidence.

No surprise

Though Delaware has long had a reputation as a place to get and die from cancer, Dr. Jaime Rivera, secretary of the Division of Public Health, urged residents not to overreact to the findings.

"I'm neither alarmed nor surprised. The results were not unexpected," Rivera told The News Journal after a reporter reviewed a copy of the report. "Any time you look at a large area for incidence, you are going to find areas that have a few more than others. But the findings always throw up a yellow flag to look further into what might be the cause."

Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, who has made the cancer battle a focus of her two terms, echoed Rivera.

"There's nothing in the report anybody needs to be alarmed about. There are some areas a little higher than others in Delaware, especially where people have moved from other states and retired here. It isn't all of Delaware."

The report noted that cancers take up to 40 years to develop, and those who recently moved to Delaware likely didn't contract the disease here.

But just as the Millsboro-area findings led activists and residents to suspect pollution as the main culprit, so did the new report.

Sen. David McBride, a Democrat who represents the Hares Corner and Wilmington Manor areas -- part of the New Castle region, with inflated rates of lung cancer, prostate cancer and all cancers combined -- said he suspects the high rates stem from the area's history as a "dumping ground" for chemical plants and other heavy industry.

"I'm highly concerned," said McBride, who hadn't yet read the report. "If in fact those clusters are showing up in these areas, I want to know what we're going to do about it."

Rivera said public health officials will soon be briefing state legislators and working with lawmakers to arrange meetings in communities where clusters were found.

Input will be sought from Minner's Delaware Consortium of state officials, health professionals, civic leaders and activists. If appropriate, formal epidemiological studies will be conducted in affected areas; one is now being conducted in the Millsboro area, where cancer victims and their families are being interviewed to evaluate how they might have contracted the disease.

McBride, a consortium member, said he definitely will hold community meetings about the cancer findings. "You can underline that. The residents will expect me to be their voice in this matter."

27 areas studied

To look for clusters, researchers divided Delaware into 27 areas with populations from about 6,000 to 84,000. The state only studied incidence of the four most frequent cancer types -- lung, colorectal, prostate and breast -- as well as "all cancer combined." The rates are age-adjusted to account for the fact that people get cancer more frequently as they age.

Studying smaller tracts, such as a section of Wilmington, was ruled out because scientific analysis is unreliable when there are too few cases of cancer. Instead the study focused on County Census Divisions, groups of adjoining census tracts.

In recent months, the state denied The News Journal's requests for its cancer data -- which officials had provided in 2001 and 2003 -- denying the newspaper the ability to conduct its own study of cancer incidence. A 2004 newspaper series on Delaware's high cancer death rate, especially among the poor, led state lawmakers to allocate several million dollars to Minner's proposal for cancer screening and treatment programs for the uninsured.

Rivera's office, meanwhile, spent several months conducting its own study.

Some of the findings:

- The Middletown-Odessa census division, which runs from the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal almost to the Kent County line, and has about 41,000 people, had a colorectal cancer rate 44.8 percent above the state average.

- The Kenton area near Dover, home to about 6,000 people, was 22.4 percent above average for all cancer cases.
- The city of Wilmington, with 72,000 people, was 10 percent above average for all cancers, 21.1 percent above average for prostate cancer and 17.5 percent above average for lung cancer.
- The Millsboro area had a lung cancer rate 29.8 percent above average.

Kim Furtado, a naturopathic practitioner who had led the fight to convince state officials to conduct the initial study around the Indian River plant, said she expected the state to find such clusters.

"If we refuse to look, we'll never find," Furtado said. "This is the cutting edge of what a public health department is supposed to do. So this is an excellent first step, to understand the depth and breadth of the problem. Now we need to roll up our sleeves."

Jay Cooperson, chairman of the Sierra Club environmental group in Delaware, said members of his group would be itching to study the report but said his initial reaction was that the amount of cancer clusters is "a pretty shockingly high number."

Rivera said that while the state cannot pin the high incidence on environmental causes, the impact of pollution on communities "goes beyond these cancers" to respiratory disorders, allergies and other ailments.

"By no means does this let industries off the hook, chemical companies off the hook," Rivera said.

He also cautioned residents and activists to be aware that like pollution, behaviors can increase cancer risk.

"We're seeing an increase in lung cancer, which is overwhelmingly the result of tobacco exposure. Delawareans need to avoid tobacco," Rivera said.

Minner, who leaves office in January, said she will continue to battle the disease over the remaining months of her tenure.

"This report is just part of what we really need to know," she said. "We'll continue to work on this."
