

REGIONAL NEWS

'Cancer Alley' theory debunked

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GONZALES—'Cancer Alley' may be more of a mind set than a scientific reality, according to a researcher who has studied Louisiana's cancer rates.

Dr. Vivien Chen, director of the Louisiana Tumor Registry, said cancer incidence rates in Ascension Parish track or are slightly lower than national rates.

However, cancer mortality rates — especially for white men with lung cancer — far exceed national rates, she said.

Chen spoke about her research before giving a presentation Wednesday at the Ascension Parish Economic Development Family meeting here.

She limited her remarks to Ascension Parish data, but Chen is scheduled to discuss data collected in the seven-parish industrial corridor from Baton Rouge and south at a meeting next Thursday in Baton Rouge.

Chen's research findings have been released before and have come under fire from some environmental scientists and activists.

Chen has blamed lifestyle factors such as smoking and diet for the high lung cancer rates found in white men in south Louisiana.

"I'm all for a clean environment... If the environment is polluted, we need to clean it up. We don't have to wait for a higher cancer rate," Chen said.

"I'm also a strong believer that if it's your lifestyle behavior that's causing cancer, let's do something about it," she said. "It's always so much easier to blame (cancer) on something

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you don't have control over."

Part of the perception problem dates back to the 1970s when statistics on cancer mortality in south Louisiana first were publicized, she said. Those high death rates could be caused by the failure of south Louisiana residents to get early detection and treatment of cancer, she said.

Cancer incidence rates are a more accurate portrayal of any particular cancer problem in a community, Chen said.

In Ascension Parish, the incidence rates of all cancers from 1983-87 among white men tracked the national average and the rates among black men, black women and white women were slightly lower than the national averages, Chen said.

The highest cancer incidence rate is for lung cancer among white men in Ascension Parish. That rate is 128 cases per 100,000 people, far exceeding the national rate of 83 cases per 100,000 people.

Oddly, the black male lung cancer incidence

rate in Ascension Parish is far lower than the national average. It's 89 cases per 100,000 people, compared to the national average of 133 cases per 100,000 people, Chen said.

The lung cancer rates for black and white women in Ascension Parish were slightly lower than the national averages, she said.

Chen believes the statistics can be explained by lifestyle behavior, such as smoking, rather than industrial air pollution.

The high cancer mortality rates in south Louisiana also may be explained by the high incidence of lung cancer, which is the most fatal form of all cancers, she said.

Chen cautions that statistics are just that — statistics — and they do not prove causes. Chen said she also is aware of an ongoing project in Ascension Parish to "map" residences of cancer patients to possible environmental factors. The problem with the correlation study is that cancers take up to 20 years to develop from environmental causes, Chen said.

For a more accurate analysis of possible cancer causes, Chen said the state or federal government would have to fund a massive study tracking thousands of south Louisiana residents in the industrial corridor for 20 years.

Such a study would require blood and tissue testing of its human subjects as well as sampling of environmental factors such as air, drinking water and land, she said.

In the meantime, Chen urges state and federal officials to increase funding for cancer awareness programs, early detection and improved treatments.

CANCER INCIDENCE 1983-1987

Cases per 100,000 people	ASCENSION PARISH	NATIONAL AVERAGE
ALL CANCERS		
White men	424	424
Black men	438	524
White women	280	332
Black women	277	323
Lung cancer		
White men	128	83
Black men	99	133
White women	35	36
Black women	28	39
Large intestine cancer		
White men	46	62
Black men	14	58
White women	32	44
Black women	25	47
Breast cancer		
White women	86	102
Black women	55	89
Prostate cancer		
White men	78	85
Black men	80	131

Source: La. Tumor Registry

Advocate graphic