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Cancer in Louisiana: Industry or Ignorance?

by Stephen J. Little

Smoking or smokestacks? Chemicals or cholesterol? Industry or ignorance? There is a debate over the cancer problem in Louisiana.

High incidence of cancer mortality in South Louisiana has led many to believe that industry generated pollution puts residents here at a higher health risk than in other parts of the nation. And, looking solely on the surface, that seems plausible: more people die of cancer in South Louisiana than in other parts of the nation—and we have a larger concentration of oil, gas, and chemical industries here polluting the atmosphere. Ergo, industrial pollution causes cancer.

But, as so often happens, what appears to be the case may not, in fact, be true. A study prepared by the Louisiana State Medical Center, New Orleans reveals two important facts: There is no higher incidence rate of most cancers in South Louisiana than the rest of the nation; and when they are higher, the causes are more likely related to lifestyle than industrial pollution.

The study, comparing cancer incidence rates in South Louisiana to national rates for the years 1983-86, reveals that, with the exception of lung cancer, residents of South Louisiana do not have a greater risk of developing the most common cancers. The report states, "Incidence rates for all cancers combined in South Louisiana are either the same as, or lower than, the national (SEER) rates." (SEER is the federal program which collects and analyzes information on cancer cases from nine areas of the country representing about 10 percent of the U.S. population.)

Some of the report's findings include:

- Incidence rates of colon and rectal cancer are at or below national rates;
- Incidence rates for cancers of the breast, ovary, and uterus (except cervix) are significantly lower among white women in South Louisiana than in the rest of the nation;
- Cancer of the prostate, the most common cancer in U.S. men, occurs significantly less frequently in both black and white men residing in South Louisiana;

-Both blacks and whites in South Louisiana have substantially lower rates of skin melanoma;

-Cancers of the mouth (oral cavity), throat (pharynx) and esophagus are significantly less common in black males in South Louisiana than black males in the SEER program.

Finally, the study states, "The most frequent cancer in Louisiana is lung cancer, accounting for 20 percent of all newly diagnosed cases." Furthermore, "There is no doubt that smoking is the most important cause of cancer in Louisiana."

And what of industrial pollution? "Air, water and land pollution have been suggested as major causes of cancer in South Louisiana. The data in this monograph and the many cancer studies conducted to date in South Louisiana do not support this conclusion."

Rejecting Personal Responsibility

"For years the cancer problem in Louisiana has been ignored," says Michael Martin, President and CEO of the Mary Bird Perkins Cancer Center in Baton Rouge. "Nobody ever did any research or asked any questions. I think people were always afraid the cause was the petrochemical industry and didn't want to say anything because it was our breadbasket." Instead of performing research to determine true causes, he says, people kept mum and silently blamed industry. Today, however, the fear and suspicion are out in the open; and there is still not sufficient data to effectively prove or disprove that industrial pollution causes cancer.

"Many people are so intent on placing blame they won't look to other causes. They have got it in their minds that the problem is the petrochemical industry and they don't want to study it in a scientific method—they want the data to say what they want," says Martin. "Responsible researchers feel like the causes may be lifestyle—things like alco-

hol consumption and smoking."

Buttressing his point, Martin points out that the only real problem we have with cancer in South Louisiana is lung cancer among white males. "If this were caused by the petrochemical industry it would affect people of all races and gender—not just white males," said Martin.

Furthermore, he says, blaming the petrochemical industry removes from people the personal responsibility of making healthy lifestyle choices. "My beef is 'let's take responsibility for our own actions'—if we smoke why do we point at the petrochemical industry?"

Dr. Vincent Covello, professor of Environmental Science and Medicine at Columbia University, says much the same thing. According to his research, only 10 percent of people surveyed will ascribe "lifestyle-genetics" to causes of cancer, while 4 percent list as a cause "environmental factors." When he first conducted his survey in 1975 the results were much the same. Since this survey was taken in pre-environmentalism days, some 90 percent simply listed "fate."

"There is no acceptance of personal responsibility," Covello said.