

Cancer: Investigators sharpen focus

Continued from Page 1A

more than a century. The state began investigating possible environmental hazards in April after parents raised concerns about a seemingly elevated rate of cancer among current and former Southside students.

State health investigators were told of about 46 students who had developed cancer.

But when that information was checked against the state cancer registry and with local hospitals, just 25 cases of cancer were confirmed. And of those cases, three students were found to have developed cancer before entering Southside High.

Most of the 22 students who developed cancer after entering high school had leukemia or lymphoma, the health department reported.

Information collected by the Star-Gazette, however, shows that at least three current and former students have developed testicular cancer since 1997.

The report said state investigators did not receive enough information on 11 other students to confirm whether they actually had cancer.

Health officials tried to get a more accurate picture of the cancer rate for the area around Southside High by checking the cancer registry for the incidence of the disease among children from infancy to 19 years of age in three ZIP codes. The ZIP codes were 14904 in Elmira, 14871 in Pine City and 14894 in Wellsburg.

Twenty-two children had cancer diagnosed in those ZIP codes; 23 cases had been expected, the report said. Six cases were found among children ages 15 to 19; seven were expected.

The numbers do not include former students with cancer who moved out of state.

School officials said last week that they would contact alumni who have moved out of the area and do not know about the cancer probe.

Some residents say they hope such efforts will fill in any gaps in the state's data.

Signor said state investigators now will pay special attention to the handful of students who have developed testicular cancer, trying to ascertain from medical records and interviews, for example, whether the students shared any risk factors that would increase their chances of developing this form of the disease.

Testicular cancer is rare, accounting for just 1 percent of all cancers in men, according to the American Medical Association. The disease strikes four of every 100,000 American men each year, the American Medical Association says.

Among teens ages 15 to 19, three cases are diagnosed in every 100,000 males, according to the Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results Cancer Statistics Review, known as the SEER review.

The number of new testicular cases diagnosed each year had risen 41.5 percent between 1973 and 1996, the SEER review found.

Former Southside student Thomas Patros, 21, the son of Julie and Andrew Patros, was found to have testicular cancer in 1997. The diagnosis shocked his parents. Thomas Patros lifted weights and played sports most of the year at Southside, and unlike many teenagers, he avoided junk food and watched his diet.

"You're kind of in a fog," Julie Patros said of her son's diagnosis. "You really don't think it's going to happen to you and then you get caught up in this snowball of going

to different doctors."

The doctors, however, couldn't tell the Patros family what had caused Thomas Patros' cancer.

Very little is known about the possible causes of testicular cancer, although several studies have identified men who may run a higher risk of the disease:

- Men who had an undescended testicle during childhood.

- Men whose mothers took a potent synthetic estrogen called DES, or diethylstilbestrol, during pregnancy.

- Men who have been exposed to environmental pollutants such as pesticides, fertilizers, tar, soot and oils.

Dr. Patricia Meinhardt, executive medical director of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Arnot Ogdén Medical Center in Elmira, said that pinpointing a cause would be very difficult.

"The increase in testicular cancer based on chemical exposure is still speculative," Meinhardt said.

Among adults, scientists can examine long-term lifestyles, such as smoking, diet, exercise and occupational hazards.

"We can gather a lot more information on adults," Meinhardt said. "Generally, the cause of cancer in children is unknown."

To help find a cause, Meinhardt said, investigators can examine the parents' medical history and their exposure to hazards such as cigarette smoke and chemicals before the child's conception or during pregnancy.

Nationwide, Meinhardt said, the cancer rate among children has been rising 1 percent a year for the past decade. Even so, she said, childhood cancers account for only 2 percent of all cancers.

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