

Cancer

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soft-tissue cancers. The health department has a list of 22 cases, but Kump said that list does not include a Southside graduate recently found to have colon cancer who has previously been interviewed and photographed by the Star-Gazette. Nor did Kump's list include another graduate who died in 1997 at age 31 of glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer.

Those two cases were apparently not reported to the health department. The total number now stands at 24.

"Those numbers and diseases are fairly typical of that age group, although some of the cancers, like breast cancer, are rare in young people," said Dr. Thomas Aberhalden, an oncologist and medical director of the Falck Cancer Center at Arnot Ogdenville Hospital in Elmira.

Cancer investigation

An investigation into the cancers at the school began April 11, after several parents and City Council members notified school officials of 13 known cases of the disease among current and former students.

The health department then began collecting more detailed information from parents and students — and the numbers rose.

Nationally, the National Cancer Institute says, the most common cancers affecting children up to 19 years old are leukemia, lymphoma and soft tissue sarcoma, and cancers



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of the central nervous system, skin, thyroid and reproductive organs.

But cancer in people younger than 20 is relatively uncommon, the American Cancer Society reports.

Three of the Southside students have testicular cancer, a form of the disease that strikes four of every 100,000 American men and accounts for just 1 percent of all cancers in men. Chemung County's total population, male and female, is 92,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

But testicular cancer is more common between the ages of 19 and 35, according to the National Cancer Institute.

"Only one in 300 kids get cancer before they are 20," said Dr. Aura

Weinstein, director of the state health department's cancer surveillance program.

Southside High, located on South Main Street, is built on a former industrial property that was home to companies that manufactured everything from business machines to fire engines for more than a century. The fuel oil — a remnant of those industrial years — that contaminates school property is being cleaned up. State health officials say it is not a health threat because it is 14 to 16 feet below ground.

A recently completed cleanup of the adjacent industrial property — which housed the former Remington Rand and American LaFrance factories, among others — found various abandoned underground storage tanks, solvents, metals, chemicals and other hazardous wastes that have been there for years. Health officials say that property now is also safe.

State health and environmental agencies this week were to begin testing the school campus and a former recreation area south of the factory for the same chemicals found at the adjacent industrial property.

Some neighbors want more than tests

But that doesn't comfort some Southside residents.

"I think these numbers are extremely high," said 29-year-old William Boyd of Elmira, a 1989 Southside High School graduate who last month learned he has plasmacytoma, a rare form of bone marrow cancer.

Boyd is one of the 22 students the health department has on its list.

"I just wish the (officials) would stop lying and tell us the damn truth," Boyd said. "They don't give us straight answers."

There's not enough public information about the reported cancer cases to determine how those rates compare with national statistics, said Bob Kuska, a spokesman for the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md.

Local and state health officials won't release the names, ages, genders or addresses of the students, for reasons of confidentiality.

Their information was sent to state health officials, who will verify that the students have cancer, review the information, see how the cases could be related, and determine whether the numbers and types of cancer are out of the ordinary, said Clair Popsil, a state health department spokeswoman.

The results will be released to the public, though Popsil couldn't be specific about a date.

"If they are high, we could do a cancer study and look at the specific types of cancer and what age groups they're affecting," said Popsil.

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