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Cancer rates high in C8 areas

■ Year-old study by state released

By Ken Ward Jr.
Staff writer

Residents in the communities where water is polluted with the toxic chemical C8 have elevated levels of several cancers, according to a previously confidential state government analysis.

The study was drafted more than a year ago by the state Department of Health and Human Resources, but was never finalized or made public.

On Tuesday, DHHR officials offered varying answers about why the study wasn't completed — and whether they actually planned to finish it.

"I don't know that there was ever a conscious decision not to inform the public," said Chris Curtis, acting commissioner of DHHR's Bureau for Public Health. "It was one of those things that was simply put aside and never finished."

In the study, DHHR scientists used state cancer registry data to compare disease rates statewide with those in counties where water has been contaminated by C8.

Agency researchers found elevated rates of prostate cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in Wood and Jackson counties, according to a draft of the study.

DHHR also discovered high rates of leukemia and skin cancer in Wood County, where a DuPont Co. plant makes and discharges C8, according to the study.

The study found increased cancer rates in Mason County, but those were not elevated enough to be considered significant.

"The analyses presented here establish only that the rates of certain cancers previously associated with occupational PFOA exposure are elevated in counties in which residents may have been exposed to PFOA via the water supply," the study said. "They do not demonstrate a causal relationship between PFOA and individual cancer cases."

"These data do, however, establish the need for further examination of the impact of non-occupational exposures to PFOA on cancer incidence in communities," the study concluded.

Since the 1950s, DuPont has used C8 at its Washington Works chemical plant south of Parkersburg. The chemical is used to make Teflon, other nonstick products, oil-resistant paper packaging and stain- and water-repellent textiles.

C8 is another name for ammonium perfluorooctanoate, or PFOA.

Researchers are finding that people around the world have C8 in their blood. The blood levels may be generally small, but it is unclear whether these amounts are dangerous.

Nonstick cookware may be one route of exposure to C8, but recent studies suggest that food packaging may be a much bigger source.

In the Parkersburg area, DuPont is paying — as part of a \$107.6 million lawsuit settlement — to install new water treatment systems to get C8 out of local drinking water supplies. The company is also funding a detailed study of C8 health effects by an independent, three-scientist panel.

In its study, the state DHHR compared statewide data from the West Virginia Cancer Registry to the registry's data for Wood, Mason and Jackson counties.

After adjusting for age, DHHR researchers found statistically significant elevated rates of prostate cancer and non-Hodgkin lymphoma in Wood and Jackson counties. For example, the prostate cancer rate in Wood County was 162 cases per 100,000 people, compared to 148 per 100,000 people statewide, the study said.

The elevated prostate and skin cancer rates were consistent with previous studies of plant workers that reported associations of PFOA with those diseases, the DHHR study said.

However, some of the cancers found to be elevated in the DHHR C8 study — including non-Hodgkin lymphoma and chronic lymphocytic leukemia — have not been reported elsewhere to be associated with the chemical.

Also, some cancers found to be elevated in worker C8 studies, such as bladder and kidney cancer, were not found to be statistically significantly elevated in the DHHR study.

DHHR researchers said that some other factors, such as age, race and income, did not appear to be factors in their findings.

But the agency's study noted that pesticides used in the area could be a factor. More study would be needed to rule it out, the study said.

Also, the study noted the release into the area's air of the chemical 1,3-butadiene, which has been associated with elevated cancer rates. The GE Chemical plant in Wood County, located next door to DuPont, releases 1,3-butadiene into the air, according to federal records.

The DHHR study came to light only after a lawyer for Wood County residents who drank C8-contaminated water discovered it in state Department of Environmental Protection files and distributed it to various parties, including the Gazette.

Jessica Greathouse, DEP's communications officer, said Tuesday that her agency "inadvertently disclosed" the draft report in response to a Freedom of Information Act request.

But under state law, the basic facts of the study — including the cancer rate comparisons — would have to be released. Only commentary or recommendations by the study's authors could be withheld.

After the Gazette began asking questions about the DHHR study, DEP officials contacted the residents' lawyer to try to retrieve the document and prevent its public disclosure.

DHHR's Curtis said that she could think of no real harm that would have come from releasing the study.

"I don't know that it would have hurt anything in retrospect," Curtis said. "There was some talk about expanding it or looking at some other information, but ultimately that was never completed."

Study author Patricia Colsher said that she was waiting a year to add new data — cancer rates from 2006 and for other counties affected by C8 — to finalize the study.

"We did it, edited it, and then as the whole concern kind of expanded to other health outcomes and to other counties, we decided to hold off for another year's data," Colsher said.

With the 2006 data now available, she said, a final study could be completed sometime later this year.

One of Colsher's supervisors, state epidemiologist Loretta Haddy, agreed that the plan was to add new data and publish the report.

A timeline or exact plan for doing so has not been put together, Haddy said. "It's still in the evolutionary phase," Haddy said.

As for why the agency did not make public the preliminary findings in the draft study, Haddy said that decision was made by one of her superiors, Joe Barker, DHHR's director of Epidemiology and Health Promotion. Barker did not return repeated phone calls Tuesday.

Dan Turner, a media spokesman for DuPont, released a short statement about the study from Robert Rickard, DuPont's science director.

"We agree with the authors that studies of this kind can provide a useful initial screen of differences in disease rates across geographic areas," Rickard said. "But, as the authors themselves acknowledge, the study cannot and does not identify any cause that explains the observations."

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