Lawsuit in Ohio cancer cluster will take years

JOHN SEEWER - Associated Press - Associated Press

The wait for answers is far from over for parents who for years have lived with the worry of not knowing what's behind the mysterious cancers that have sickened dozens of children in a rural area of northern Ohio.

Despite a federal civil lawsuit that points toward a possible cause, the issue is far from settled.

Not much is known about the chemical compound detected by environmental testing in the attics of homes that sit inside the cancer cluster where nearly 40 young people have been diagnosed with various types of cancer since the mid-1990s.

The families believe smokestacks from Whirlpool Corp.'s huge washing machine plant in Clyde sent the compound called benzaldehyde into the neighborhoods where several of the children lived and were among the first diagnosed. Their lawsuit filed last week also accused the company of dumping potentially cancer-causing waste at a now-closed park outside of the city just south of Lake Erie.

It will take years for the case to wind through the courts, if it goes to trial.

Whirlpool, based in Benton Harbor, Mich., has said it would vigorously defend itself, its employees and the community against the allegations.

The appliance maker previously said it wants to help find out what was causing the illnesses and paid for recent soil and water testing. "Whirlpool has been part of the fabric of the Clyde community for more than 60 years and we remain committed to acting responsibly," a company statement said.

One of the biggest questions about the claims made by the families in their lawsuit is whether benzaldehyde — used as a solvent in painting and porcelain coating — could have made the children sick.

Attorneys for the families cited a handful of studies and a New Jersey Department of Health fact sheet from 2002 that warned that breathing the compound can irritate the nose and throat. It also stated that high levels of exposure can cause seizures.

"Whether or not it poses a cancer or reproductive hazard needs further study," the memo said.

A study of benzaldehyde released in 1990 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that it did not cause cancer in rats, but there were indications it caused cancer in mice.

What impact there is on people needs to be studied by a cancer researcher, said Alan Mortensen, an attorney for the families.

But waiting for such a study will mean a longer delay for the lawsuit to go forward.

"Our clients are in it for the long haul," Mortensen said. "They've already been in it for the long haul."

The lawsuit filed Tuesday in Toledo is seeking at least $5 million in damages.

Pinpointing the cause of a cancer cluster rarely — if ever — happens.

During the 1960s and '70s, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention investigated 108 cancer clusters around the United States, most of them childhood leukemia. But they found no definite causes for any of them.

Ohio health and environmental investigators have spent years testing the air and water around Clyde and talking with the children and their families about where they live and work and what they might have been exposed to. But they've never come up with answer.

After the lawsuit was filed, the state health department posted an information sheet online that downplayed the dangers of benzaldehyde, calling it a commonly found substance used as an additive in food and cleaning products.

It's also found in perfumes, deodorants, soaps and moisturizers, the advisory said.

"Based on what we are looking at, we don't see it as a problematic level," health department spokesman Robert Jennings told The Blade newspaper in Toledo.

Some investigators have speculated the cause was environmental and may have been a one-time event — possibly a chemical from a factory or a dump that polluted the air or water. The diagnoses peaked in 2006, when nine children were diagnosed with cancer.

Mortensen said he doesn't expect environmental regulators to ever to confirm what's behind the illnesses.

He only needs to convince a jury, he said, that disregard for public health caused the cancer cluster.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/15/2014 - 11:39pm*):
http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2013/05/lawsuit-ohio-cancer-cluster-will-take-years