December 7, 2020
[Response via email]

Dear Providers:

Thank you for your letter and call to action about protecting Pennsylvania from the health effects of shale gas development. The Department of Health (DOH) takes its role seriously as the public health advocate for all Pennsylvanians, including when addressing environmental health.

The DOH is open to working with legislators and stakeholders in addressing Oil and Natural Gas Production (ONGP) from a public health perspective. We will continue to work with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Governor and the legislature to address potential public health concerns.

DOH continuously reviews our collected data and peer reviewed published journal articles. While the growing body of research is still small, some recent studies have found adverse health impacts associated with ONGP (particularly in relation to birth outcomes and respiratory effects); at this time there is still an insufficient number of studies with strong scientific methods to provide sufficient evidence to determine the overall health effects.

To date, the strongest published evidence for adverse impacts are related to decreased birth weight, preterm birth and small for gestational age effects as well as for asthma exacerbation; however, for birth outcomes there have also been recent studies which do not show an effect. The DOH will continue to monitor and evaluate relevant literature.

Other examples of DOH activities to better understand and address health impacts associated with ONGP include:

- Earlier this year, the department released the results of its study on Ewing’s Family of tumors, childhood cancer and total cancer standard incidence ratio results for certain counties in Western Pennsylvania. This report was a supplementary analysis to our report released in April 2019.
- DOH collaborates with DEP in evaluating environmental sample test results from citizens with health concerns related to ONGP.
- DOH participated in several community meetings about ONGP.
- DOH developed an expanded health specific complaint registry. Complaints are being logged using a tool that allows standardized data collection and analysis.
- DOH provides an online quarterly ONGP Tracking Report of complaint type and reported symptoms as well as total complaints received.
• DOH is working to finalize an agreement with a major university to perform two studies related to ONGP; one study will focus on childhood cancers and one will focus on acute and intermediate effects such as asthma and adverse birth effects. Study results and conclusions are anticipated to be completed by December 2022.

The department is committed to working with the community on this issue and will continue to monitor the data for Ewing’s tumors and childhood cancers in the area over the next several years as more data become available.

Thank you for your interest about ONGP and its potential impact on public health. I look forward to ongoing communication as the DOH continues to research and learn more about this topic.

Sincerely,

Rachel L. Levine, MD
Secretary of Health
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania