

May 15, 2019

Sharon Watkins, Ph.D.  
Director, Bureau of Epidemiology  
PA Department of Health  
625 Forster Street  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Dr. Watkins:

Thank you for your response to our questions regarding your report, "Ewing's Family of Tumors, Childhood Cancer, and Radiation Related Cancer Incidence Review for Washington County and Canon-McMillan School District in Pennsylvania." I appreciate any and all transparency that can be brought to this issue and believe that the concerned citizens of Southwest Pennsylvania deserve this, at least.

Having said that, we are disappointed that, rather than considering a public meeting, you are depending on a confirmation of your findings and methodology from the CDC to address concerns raised by the community and local officials. Your findings were inconclusive. Your methodology, in its history, has rarely succeeded in elucidating environmental exposures and providing the public with guidance on avoiding them. Yet we know that environmental carcinogens pervade our daily lives. When we take a reactionary approach, as opposed to a precautionary one, we allow industries to expose us to carcinogens and then depend on epidemiologists to prove, through statistical significance, that these carcinogens have caused our cancers.

For example, we know that the process of unconventional oil and gas development (an industry that has saturated Southwest Pennsylvania) potentially emits not one but 55 known, probable, or possible human carcinogens, including benzene, formaldehyde, and radium (Elliott et al., 2017). A cancer risk assessment done in Colorado measured levels of carcinogens in air pollution near oil and gas well sites and determined that individuals living within 2,000 feet of these facilities have a lifetime excess cancer risk exceeding the EPA's acceptable level of risk of 1 in 10,000 (McKenzie et al., 2018), and that is not considering potential carcinogenic exposures through the radioactive waste stream generated by the process or water contaminated by hydraulic fracturing fluid.

Despite knowing the risks, and knowing that ultimately no level of exposure to carcinogens is safe, we tell communities to bear the burden of proof. In essence, we must wait until enough of our children get cancer to wave the red flag. And when the community does notice that their children are developing cancer at an alarming rate, instead of highlighting how their concerns are invalid, wouldn't a more appropriate response be to focus on the carcinogens we know they are exposed to, offer strategies to avoid them, and ultimately

guide industry and lawmakers to remove them from the community? Or better yet, how about taking these precautionary steps before tragedy strikes?

So while the CDC may confirm that your findings were inconclusive and that you aptly followed the established protocol, we ask you again to clarify your message to the community. Do your inconclusive findings translate into a reassurance of safety for these residents and their children?

Here at EHP, we believe in putting the community first. In this spirit, we are planning to host a community discussion bringing together residents and experts to talk about the issue of childhood cancer in the region, how being exposed to environmental pollution may play a part, and what we can do to protect ourselves. The Pennsylvania Department of Health should be a part of this discussion. We invite you or a representative from your organization to sit on an expert panel to clarify your message and take questions from residents of the state whose health you are entrusted with protecting. The meeting is planned for the week of June 10<sup>th</sup>. We will be sure to keep you updated as details solidify.

Sincerely,

Sarah Rankin, MPH, BSN, OCN  
Public Health Nurse  
Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project

References:

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- McKenzie, L.M., Blair, B., Hughes, J., Allshouse, W.B., Blake, N.J., Helmig, D., . . . Adgate, J.L. (2018). Ambient nonmethane hydrocarbon levels along Colorado's Northern Front Range: Acute and chronic health risks. *Environmental Science and Technology*, 52, 4514-4525. <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1021/acs.est.7b05983>

cc: Lora Siegmann Werner, MPH, Gov. Tom Wolf, Rep. Tim O'Neal