Cancer answers not found

By BOB ANDERSON
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For several years environmentalists, health officials and industry representatives have debated the reasons for the high incidence of lung cancer in a number of south Louisiana's parishes.

Many people hoped that an international lung cancer conference conducted over the past three days in New Orleans would answer the question, particularly since preliminary results of two major lung cancer studies from Louisiana and east Texas were being presented.

An analysis

While the studies brought out some important points that weigh on each side of the environmental issue, there were no definitive answers as to why South Louisiana is one of the nation's lung cancer hot spots.

As in other lung cancer studies, the new research showed that smoking is the major cause of lung cancer - a point with which none of the lung cancer experts from around the world wished to quibble.

Research by Dr. Pelayo Correa indicated that 5 percent more people smoke in southern Louisiana than in the northern part of the state, but lung cancer experts also said that does not make up for the doubling of per capita lung cancer cases in the southern part of the state.

Some other facts were presented about smoking among a subgroup of south Louisianaans - particularly that a majority of Cajun men had rolled their own cigarettes at one point in their lives. But the significance of that point has not been determined, one of Correa's research

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associates said.

Correa's research also indicated that persons who live near a Louisiana industry have a 60 percent higher lung cancer risk, even when their smoking habits are taken into consideration. But when the LSU Medical Center researcher broke those numbers down to individual industry types, where a greater margin of error means differences must be higher in order to make conclusive statements, he was unable to find anything "statistically significant" except for industries in which wood fibers are involved.

Similarly, he was unable to make any significant determinations about working in various types of industries, except for those in which there are wood fibers or oily mists in the air. In those types of industries, he found an increased risk of lung cancer.

As is not uncommon in cancer research, some other researchers have questioned those findings because they were based on information gained from death certificates rather than interviews.

Preliminary data from research just completed in Texas showed a "statistically significant" risk of lung cancer for workers in the chemical industry as well as metal manufacturing, transportation and construction. Exposure to asbestos has been shown to be a problem in other studies.

William Blot of the National Cancer Institute said counties that have petrochemical industries have higher incidents of lung cancer, but he cautioned that causal inferences should not be drawn because the matter needs further study.

"Undoubtedly there is good reason to study lung cancer in Louisiana," he said. Ms. Gottlieb and Correa, who have openly disagreed on some matters, agree that the question of higher cancer rates in south Louisiana needs further investigation.

Another finding from research elsewhere in the nation that needs further exploration is why urban residents have a higher lung cancer rate than those living in rural areas, said Dr. Carl M. Shy of the University of North Carolina.

Even for non-smokers, there is 90 percent higher risk of getting lung cancer for urban dwellers than their country cousins.

Correa found Baton Rouge industries to be a particularly complicated matter because of their clusters, and he said he will be unable to say anything definitive on any relationship that living close to them might have to lung cancer until he has had a chance to do extensive computer analyses.

The effect of working in or living near a chemical industry is an item on which both industry and environmental groups have been clamoring for further evidence since a study by Dr. Marise Gottlieb, a Tulane University medical researcher, indicated that persons living near Louisiana chemical plants have an increased risk of dying of lung cancer.

There are now 21 million Americans alive who have been exposed to asbestos in the jobs, many of whom will die of lung cancer, he said.

"Urban air pollution is a bewildering array of known, suspected and possible carcinogens," said Shy, who suggested that further research be done.

Dr. Irving Selikoff, of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, cautioned his fellow researchers about hastily dismissing possible causes of lung cancer as being insignificant.

He cited exposure to asbestos, which is still causing thousands of people a year to die of lung cancer, as an example of writing off a problem. Quoting a physician testifying on possible workplace regulations being considered to prevent lung disease in 1906, he read: "Concernable trouble is now taken to prevent inhalation of dust, and so the disease is not so likely to occur as heretofore."

Even after adjusting for occupational exposure, the urban resident is more likely to get cancer, he said.

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Selikoff and others at the conference said asbestos exposure and possibly other exposures act as multiplying factors when persons also smoke cigarettes.

Using the asbestos problem as an example, he suggested close scrutiny of exposures to other types of materials in the question of what things cause lung cancer.

"Occupational disasters do not generally result from miscalculations," he said. "They result from very careful calculations, many of which are wrong."

He urged his fellow researchers to be very careful before dismissing any possible causes of lung cancer.

"Remember," he said, "We're dealing with people's lives."