Cancer data about to be computerized

By BOB ANDERSON
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Why Louisiana has high death rates for some types of cancer — particularly lung cancer — has been a matter of debate for years.

Lack of computerized information on cancer incidence has made studying the situation difficult and made it harder for researchers to get grants to work in Louisiana. That’s about to change as a result of work to be done by the LSU Medical Center and funded by the Louisiana Chemical Association.

Several years ago, a tumor registry, which logs and pinpoints cancer incidences, was created and later funded after a long political battle. It was hoped the registry would be a first step in identifying where and why excess cancer rates are occurring.

The information collected by the registry has been checked for accuracy and filed away. Unfortunately there was no money to have it computerized except for the information collected in the New Orleans area, according to Jean Craig, director of the Louisiana Tumor Registry.

The information has been dug out in a few cases when questions were raised about a possible cancer cluster in a particular area, she said. In such cases, health officials have had to wade through the files manually to gain the information they need.

Broader studies to look at cancer rates across the southern part of the state or pick out cancer clusters are impractical, if not impossible, without having the information computerized, Craig said.

In fact, many large institutions won’t consider giving cancer-research grants unless the area to be studied has a computerized cancer registry, she said.

Because cancer incidence rates for most of south Louisiana are not readily available, researchers must rely instead on cancer mortality information, said Dr. Pelayo Correa of the LSU Medical Center.

Mortality information is not as useful in assessing risks as incidence data because many cancers are cured and therefore not counted in the death rates, he said.

So, while national cancer mortality maps have shown high rates in southern Louisiana, cancer investigators have been hampered in trying to find the cause of the problem, Correa said.

Among the ways the southern part of the state are different than the north are...
that the south has abundant coastal wetlands, different ancestry and lifestyle and a heavy concentration of petrochemical industries, the cancer researcher said.

In order to make computerized information available to researchers, the chemical industry, which often has been viewed as a possible cause of excess cancer in the area, has contracted with the LSU Medical Center to computerize the data that was collected from 1983 through 1986.

Estimated cost of the project, to be handled by Correa and Dr. Vivien Chen, is $220,000. The work should be completed by the end of next year.

Once completed, it will be put on a public-use computer tape so that researchers or the general public will have access to it, Craig said. Patient and physician names will not be included.

“\nI think it’s a very important step in getting a more accurate picture of what our cancer rate is in Louisiana,” said Dan Borne, executive director of the chemical association. “We need to get as much good science into the issue as we can.”

If regulatory decisions are based on good science, both the public and the regulated community can live with those decisions, he said.

“It’s a real challenge to do something that is accepted by the public,” Borne said. “If it’s feared that the results are biased, it doesn’t do anybody any good.”

Though the LSU research is not designed to come up with reasons for the cancer rates, Borne feels Correa’s work will provide a base upon which cancer researchers can build.

Once the data is screened and put in a computer, calculations can be made including such variables as sex, race and age, Correa said.

This new data will give researchers the information they need to analyze the causes of cancer rates in the southern part of the state, he said.