La. leads in lung cancer, lags in research

Louisiana continues to lead the nation in the rate of lung cancer deaths, and the gap is widening.

“There’s no question that the problem is getting worse,” said Dr. Pelayo Correa, head of the Louisiana Cancer and Lung Trust Fund.

Despite that, the state is near the bottom of the nation in cancer research, and the amount of money the Legislature provided for cancer research last year was peanuts, Correa said.

Not only does Louisiana lead the nation in lung cancer, but the state is also sixth in death rate from all forms of cancer, according to Ben Fontaine of the Louisiana Lung Association.

“Nearly one cancer death per hour in Louisiana is reason to be gravely concerned,” said a report by the Governor’s Task Force on Environmental Health.

Statistics from 1950 to 1968 showed that 13 of Louisiana’s 64 parishes were in the nation’s top 1 percent in lung cancer death rates and 25 other parishes, including East Baton Rouge, were in the top 10 percent.

During that period, 74 people out of 100,000 died of lung cancer each year in Louisiana, compared to 72 in the next worst state.

The latest statistics that have been compiled, showing rates for the 1970s, reveal that Louisiana’s rate has risen to 80 per 100,000, compared to 74 for second-ranked Maryland and a national average of 64.

Health officials say there is no more recent data available because data for a number of years are more useful statistically and it takes several years to prepare accurate statistics on cancer death rates.

It’s obvious that Louisiana has an unusual cancer problem — particularly in the area of lung cancer — and it is unfortunate that both the state and federal government are not putting more money into research of the problem, Correa said.

Fingers have been pointed at the petrochemical industry, Cajun lifestyle and genetic factors, but the governor’s task force — which included some of Louisiana’s leading cancer experts — said research is essential before the roles of the possible causes can be understood.

For a time last year it appeared the Legislature was going to provide the money needed to do that research. But those hopes were dashed when the Legislature took away practically all of the research funds it had granted earlier in its session.

The lawmakers passed a cigarette tax that would have provided $11 million a year for cancer research. But, later in the session, they cut that amount to $1 million, of which about $750,000 had to be spent for the Louisiana Tumor Registry.

Many legislators did not realize how much they were appropriating when they dedicated 2 cents of the tax to cancer research. When they realized it would bring in $11 million, they felt that was too much to give a program that was just getting started, said Mark Drennen, the legislative fiscal officer.

The idea was to cut that back to $1 million and see what was done with it before any larger appropriations were made, he said.

Dr. Sarah Braud, state health officer, agrees that the state needs to make available substantial funds for cancer research and said she is disappointed the Legislature whittled away the $11 million cigarette tax.

What was left over after the Tumor Registry money was subtracted was little help to a state already lagging badly in cancer research spending.

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Dr. Carl G. Kardinal of Ochsner Foundation Clinic in New Orleans said the $11 million is the kind of commitment needed on a yearly basis to discover causes of Louisiana’s cancer problem.

M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston alone spends $40 million a year on cancer research, Kardinal said.

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But researchers are hopeful that the registry, which will maintain a record of cancers diagnosed across most of the state, will be a useful tool in untangling the cancer mystery if research funds become available.

Dr. Robert Beazley of the LSU medical school thinks the state is being foolish by not providing funds for cancer research the way it provides money for research in agriculture and other areas.

The state has a number of good medical schools and universities that have people seeking cancer research funds, Beazley said. If the state would provide seed money so that they could get started, they would have “a leg up” on getting big grants from the federal government.

Not only would Louisiana be finding out what lies behind its unusual cancer problem, Beazley said, it would also be creating the kind of biomedical research industry that Gov. Edwin Edwards has indicated he would like to attract.