High cancer rates in Louisiana and in chemical-producing areas across the nation are warning flags that should lead to regulations reducing the release of cancer-causing materials, a New Orleans occupational medicine specialist said.

Studies showing the relationship between chemical areas and high cancer rates are a definite indication that "something is going on," said Dr. Velma Campbell of Ochsner Foundation Clinic.

But another such specialist in Baton Rouge maintains the link between chemical areas and high cancer rates is only circumstantial, and that current regulations are sufficient if properly enforced.

Most of the dozen doctors and cancer researchers interviewed by the Morning Advocate think the problem is a combination of numerous factors, although there is a wide range of opinion on the importance of lifestyle and pollution.

Complicated epidemiology studies need to be done to establish the "causal relationship" between specific chemical compounds and cancer deaths in these areas, Campbell said.

From a public health standpoint, government can't let bodies pile up for the years that it will take to complete such studies before taking action, the physician said. It doesn't make sense, Campbell said, to continue to expose a population with high cancer rates to cancer-causing materials.

That is particularly true in light of the levels of cancer-causing agents being found in Baton Rouge areas several miles from their industrial sources, said Dr. Victor Alexander, a New Orleans toxicologist.

Industries in Louisiana, Texas and West Virginia release the greatest amounts of cancer-causing and other dangerous pollutants, according to a recently released study by the House Subcommittee of Health and the Environment.

There is a wide difference from state to state in the amount of pollutants industries are allowed to emit, according to the Association of Local Air Pollution Control Officials in Washington. Philadelphia regulates 99 substances, while many other cities and states and the federal government regulate very few air pollutants.

The only toxic air pollutants regulated by Louisiana are the five that are also regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, the California Democrat who ordered the Congressional study, criticized EPA for not regulating more pollutants, especially the 37 hazardous air pollutants EPA put on a priority study list more than a decade ago.

Persons who live near Louisiana chemical plants have a higher chance than others of dying of cancer, according to two studies - one by Dr. Marise Gottlieb of Tulane Medical School and the other by Dr. Pelayo Correa of LSU Medical School.

Dr. Roy Regan, a Baton Rouge specialist in industrial medicine, said the studies do not provide definite proof the plants cause cancer. Gottlieb's study did not consider other variables, such as smoking, habits, occupation and economic status of victims, he said.

There has not been sufficient verification of Gottlieb's findings, he said, and there have been chemical company studies that indicate chemical workers have lower than average cancer rates.

Dr. Carl G. Kardinal, who served on the governor's cancer task force, said that many industry studies have a built-in bias.

Unfortunately, Kardinal said, there has not been research money available in Louisiana to look into the implications of those studies. Even if the money was available, it would take several years to complete such a study.

In light of what is already known, "it just makes good sense to reduce the exposure of the state's population to compounds that are known to cause cancer," Campbell said.

"It's better to prevent health problems than to try to treat them later."

Waiting to see the results of a widespread, long-term exposure to a potential danger rather than taking action to prevent the problem is "not good public health policy," she said.

Regan said enough evidence has not been generated to warrant further regulatory action and feels the current regulations are "probably permissible" provided that there are no "outlaws releasing material on weekends when there is no monitoring."

Kardinal said he would like to see specific regulations for known cancer-causing substances, rather than having them lumped in large categories such as total hydrocarbons. But he said setting the limits would be difficult at this point because of the inadequate available information.

Alexander feels strict regulations should be put on emission of cancer-causing substances in order to protect public health.

"The burden should be put on industry to show that compounds are safe" before they can emit them into the public's air, he said.