By Dan McCaleb
Iberia Bureau editor

COTEAU — Four children have been diagnosed with leukemia since 1987 in this small Iberia Parish community, and state health officials are investigating concerns of a potential leukemia cluster here.

The Environmental Epidemiology and Toxicology Division of the state Office of Public Health is awaiting medical records to confirm the four cases and will try to determine if any environmental factors may be contributing to the potential cluster, according to Kenneth Lanier, a state public health epidemiologist, and Dr. Xia Gan, a state-appointed consultant who works with the health department.

"If we confirm this cluster, then we would recommend a federal investigation," Gan told The Advertiser Tuesday. "Once we receive the medical records and examine them, we should know" if a cluster exists.

Leukemia is a type of cancer in which bone marrow and other blood forming organs produce increased numbers of certain types of white blood cells. It causes an increased susceptibility to infection, anemia and bleeding. It is often diagnosed in children.

The state was notified of the potential cluster after a fourth local child, an 8-year-old girl, was diagnosed with leukemia last month. Two young boys — a 7-year-old and a 9-year-old — died as a result of complications from the disease, the latest this past September. A young girl who was diagnosed with leukemia in 1987 is in remission.

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"We know this is not a coincidence," said Joan Smith, a Coteau resident and aunt of the 8-year-old girl who was diagnosed with the disease last month.

"My niece and the boy who died a couple of years ago lived across the street from each other."

"All four children lived within a one-mile radius of each other. There's no doubt in our minds that something has caused this," she said.

Smith also said that, in all four cases, the children started experiencing symptoms of leukemia in March or April.

"There are too many signs pointing to this not being a coincidence," she said.

Determining what, if any, environmental factors may be contributing to the influx of leukemia here will not be an easy process, officials said.

"It can be long and tedious," Lanier said. "And coming up with any definitive answers is not a guarantee."

Health officials will investigate, among other things, the drinking water supply, several Class C landfills located in the area, and pesticides that have been used to spray sugar cane farms in the area.

"As far as I know, there has been no real problem with the drinking water," Lanier said. "A sanitarian has taken samples and my understanding is there weren't any problems."

Local chemist Wilma Subra said health officials determined a few years ago that a leukemia cluster in Woburn, Mass., was caused by a contaminated water supply.

"What we need to do is help them so they can start putting together the pieces of what is going on," Subra said. "We don't have any answers at this point."

Subra and Iberia Parish Health Unit sanitarian Mike Stockstill met with Smith and a group of other Coteau residents at a town meeting Tuesday night.

"I can understand the community being concerned about this," Stockstill said. "Hopefully, we'll be able to get some answers."