More leukemia found near Coteau cluster

By Dan McCaleb

COTEAU — Sandy and Randy Viator are thankful that their daughter’s leukemia diagnosis was timely.

“They have the time being at least, helped her to overcome the disease, but not without the standard side effects. I’m thankful that she’s in remission,” Mrs. Viator said. “She doesn’t come back. Now we have to concentrate on finding some answers.”

Jessica is the fourth child from within a one-mile radius in Coteau confirmed to have been diagnosed with the often fatal disease since 1986, an extremely high number for such a small community.

But the number of leukemia cases in the Coteau vicinity doesn’t appear to stop there. Mrs. Viator said her fourth-grade son’s community meeting attracted more than 125 concerned residents to a local church center to discuss a potential leukemia cluster, which has been named in nearby Youngsville.

“I understand that there have been three other cases of leukemia in Youngsville (in Lafayette Parish) in recent years,” New Iberia chemist and environmentalist Wilma Suhra said Wednesday afternoon. “Two involve children and the third involves one of those children’s fathers, who just recently died of the disease.”

Youngsville, in south Lafayette Parish, borders Coteau in a corner of Acadiana where portions of four parishes — Lafayette, Iberia, Vermilion and St. Martin — come within less than a mile of each other.

“It’s scary, to think that something in the water we drink or the air we breathe may have caused this,” said Sandy Viator. “We’re not sure what to do.”

CSTATE health officials are looking into the potential leukemia cluster and said they will investigate whether any environmental factors, such as hazardous waste, contaminated drinking or ground water, contributed to the influx of cases in the area.

Any such investigation will take a lot of time and there is no guarantee of success, the officials said.

In the meantime, Suhra said area residents should try to identify any other cases in the area that may support evidence of a cluster. Residents also need to start mapping out all locations in the area where hidden environmental hazards may exist, the local health agency said.

“Not sure what has happened to him,” Guidry said. “I’m glad I get to try and get in touch with his adoptive parents so we can pass on this information.”

State and national figures place the number of leukemia patients at between nine and 13 for every 100,000 people. But the figures for Coteau, and perhaps Youngsville, are more than eight times that.

“The numbers are low enough, but it’s just a question of if it’s one cluster or two,” Guidry said.

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