New study supports linking of cancer to passive smoking

By PETER SHINKLE
Advocate staff writer

An extensive new study has found that women whose husbands smoke cigarettes are significantly more likely to get lung cancer than women whose husbands do not smoke, a New Orleans cancer researcher said Monday.

The study in New Orleans and five other cities has provided the most solid confirmation to date that environmental tobacco smoke, or cigarette smoke inhaled by people who are not smokers, causes increased cancer rates among non-smokers, said the researcher, Dr. Pelayo Correa.

“This is the most definitive, conclusive evidence that environmental tobacco smoke produces cancer in non-smokers,” Correa said after describing the study to reporters at the Baton Rouge Press Club.

The study found that non-smoking women whose husbands smoke have a 30 percent greater chance of contracting lung cancer than women whose husbands do not smoke, said Correa, chief of the epidemiology section at LSU Medical Center in New Orleans.

The study also found that the more years a non-smoking woman spends with a husband who smokes, the more likely she is to contract lung cancer.

Previous studies of environmental tobacco smoke have shown that so-called passive smoking, the inhalation of others’ cigarette smoke, caused increased cancer rates in non-smokers.

However, those studies have been attacked for failing to document thoroughly that the non-smokers had in fact never smoked, Correa said.

Some researchers questioned whether those listed as non-smokers in previous studies may in fact have been “closet smokers,” Correa said.

In the new study, “this is ruled out completely,” he said. Accounts of those who claimed to be non-smokers were corroborated by urine tests and searches of medical records, he said.
In addition, the three-year study drew its data from more than 400 non-smokers with husbands who smoke, a substantially larger pool than other studies, lending greater statistical credibility to the results, Correa said.

The National Cancer Institute provided funding for the study, which was conducted by researchers from the LSU Medical Center in New Orleans, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the Emory School of Public Health in Atlanta, the University of Texas in Houston, and the California Department of Health Services.

Correa also was quizzed by reporters over another cancer study published in July by the state Office of Public Health, which revealed that the incidence of most forms of cancer in Louisiana is at or below national rates. That study — conducted by Correa and other researchers using data from the Louisiana Tumor Registry — contrasts sharply with research from the 1930s through 1970s showing that Louisianans died from cancer at a much higher rate than the national average.

Correa said the study published in July indicates that cancer is no worse in Louisiana than in other states, but the state is failing to diagnose it at an early stage.

The state must devote its attention to educating the public about the dangers of smoking and an unhealthy diet and to improving the state’s capability to diagnose cancer, Correa said.

He also reiterated the position taken earlier by Joel Nitzkin, director of the state Office of Public Health, that the study published in July found no significant increase in cancer rates due to industrial pollution.

“What we’re saying is that if there is an effect, it is very small. We’re not saying there’s no effect,” Correa said.

However, such assertions have drawn criticism from a state official and another researcher, who have pointed out that the study involved cancer cases from all across south Louisiana. Any increased cancer experienced by people living in the vicinity of chemical plants would be “blended out” in such a larger survey, the critics said.

And the rate of lung cancer, the most common form of cancer, is higher in Louisiana than in the rest of the country, even according to the study published in July, the critics point out.

“The most important pollutant in the world, without a doubt, is tobacco smoke,” he said.

Dr. Pelayo Correa, epidemiology chief at LSU Medical Center in New Orleans, says women whose husbands smoke cigarettes are more likely to get lung cancer than women whose husbands do not smoke.