Sick & tired

Jessica Viator, 10, right, plays with her 15-month-old sister. A leukemia patient, Jessica seems to have won her battle with the disease. Jessica's leukemia is in remission; however, a large number of children from her area have been diagnosed with the same rare disease.

After more than 2 years, team still seeks cause for high cancer rate

Editor's Note: This is the first of two stories centering on the cluster of 37 Acadiana leukemia cases identified by public health officials in 1996. The second story will appear Monday.

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Staff Writer

COTEAU — Jessica Viator can leap again. The pixie-ish 10-year-old loves to dance. Dance lessons have been part of Jessica's life as long as she can remember.

Proud parents Sandy Viator and Randy Viator said Jessica was even offered a scholarship recently from a New York dance studio. Mom's verdict: New York will still be there in a few years.

For a while, Jessica had trouble making the jumps that were part of her dance routines. The reason was no mystery. Jessica's joints were sometimes painful from the chemotherapy treatment that was another part of her life for more than two years.

Jessica has leukemia. Now her disease is in remission. But, while Jessica can soar again at dance class, the study designed to explain why she and so many other Acadiana kids have leukemia has never really gotten off the ground.

"I wish I knew what they were doing with their money," Sandy Viator said.

The Louisiana Office of Public Health officials conducting the study said they're sympathetic. But they said the study has to be performed the way it's designed. And that means the...
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Sandy Viator
Mother of Jessica, a leukemia patient from Coteau.

“Tired,”

The Office of Public Health decided to launch a study to determine what caused so many leukemia cases to appear. The leukemia patients were diagnosed as having leukemia over a 15-year period, or were living there when they were born in the four parishes included — Lafayette, Vermilion, St. Martin and Iberia parishes — eventually reached 37. The leukemia patients have two things in common: All lived in the Acadiana area, and so on.

The idea behind the study was to match each leukemia patient with a healthy control subject who matched the leukemia patient in key demographic areas — the same birthday, growing up in the same neighborhood to whom the leukemia patients can be compared. The team is waiting for an answer from five more. Some of the original 37 leukemia patients have also moved and have been hard to locate, team members said.

Another anomaly: The four Coteau-area children were diagnosed as having leukemia over a 10-year period, but all began showing symptoms in late winter or spring. “We haven’t ruled anything out,” said study team member Starszak.

And Dugas said the study continues. “We’re still working on it,” she said.

But that doesn’t do much to ease the concerns of the Viators. “People ask me how the study’s going,” Sandy Viator said. “We just tell them Jessica’s doing fine. We have enough to think about now. When I think about (the study), it infuriates me. So I don’t think about it.”

(EDITOR’S NOTE: If you have any questions or comments about this article, contact Bill Deck er by telephone at 299-6327 or by e-mail at bdecker@etel.net).