

More Than Quarter of Staff at Wisconsin School Have Cancer

State Officials Don't Suspect Toxic Source

NEW RICHMOND, Wis., May 12, 2006 — - Teachers, parents and students are upset that the state Department of Health has decided against investigating high incidences of cancer at a local elementary school.

An investigation by ABC affiliate KSTP-TV in St. Paul, Minn., concluded that more than a quarter of West Elementary School's staff -- 28 of 102 staff members employed at least five years -- had been diagnosed with cancer.

Two more former students say they, too, have been diagnosed with cancer.

The New Richmond School Board decided to look into the problem more thoroughly.

"We've got an extremely serious situation there at West," said school board member Bill Brennan. "Teachers are afraid, and parents are afraid. This is important stuff."

Teacher Heidi Swetlik and her husband showed other teachers dirty air filters they had pulled from the school's heating and ventilation system.

"This is what scares us and has scared us for quite some time," Swetlik said.

The school board agreed to request that state health officials perform air quality tests.

"The more tests we can take, the more data we will have and the better we'll know what's going on," said Mike Williams, New Richmond Schools interim superintendent.

No Smoking Gun

State health officials ran tests, but found only improper chemical storage, ventilation system problems, and mold.

"I'm not going to tell you anything that would indicate there's a smoking gun or anything unusual in your school district because there just isn't," said Bill Otto of the Department of Health.

State health officials say the numbers at West Elementary are not out of the ordinary. In fact, they say they've investigated about 40 cancer clusters in Wisconsin and found none linked to the environment inside a building.

Parents and teachers, however, are upset the health department decided against performing an in-depth investigation, and at the response by Tom Sieger of the Bureau of Environmental Health.

Sieger says statistics show cancer clusters are nothing more than coincidence, and added that proper diet and exercise are important to prevent disease.

"Our information on causation of cancer is imperfect," Sieger said. "But what we do know is there are certain things we can do every day with regard to our diet, with regard to exercise."

Swetlik said those comments were thoughtless and insensitive. She says state officials would discover that was not the case if they performed an investigation.

"Here we have all these women who have been healthy, active within normal weight range," Swetlik says. "So it just doesn't make sense."

The Swetliks say they're angry the state's giving up so quickly.

"I'll go to my grave believing that it's not a coincidence," Casey Swetlik said.

"It's quite the mystery, and deep down I just pray that we'll find an answer," Heidi Swetlik said.

After seeing the dirty air filters, West officials say they will now be changed every three months.

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