

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

High cancer rates raise fear in Cape Breton

Dalhousie University study shows increased risk in Sydney area

BY NATALIE MACLELLAN

A Dalhousie study has found that residents of Sydney, Nova Scotia have a fifty percent higher risk of developing cancer than people living in the rest of the province.

The study was conducted by Dr. Judith Guernsey in the Community Health and Epidemiology department. Dr. Guernsey was approached by the Department of Health in 1991 to design a study looking into high rates of cancer in the Sydney area.

Guernsey obtained information from the Nova Scotia Cancer Registry, a database which contains basic clinical information about all cancer cases in the province, and used this data to compare the number of cases in Sydney with the rest of Nova Scotia. There was also a comparison done between cancer rates in Sydney and other parts of industrialized Cape Breton, including the communities of Glace Bay, Dominion, New Waterford, Sydney Mines and North Sydney.

"The five communities are very similar to Sydney socio-economically. They are very poor.

There are higher unemployment rates in some cases," said Guernsey. "Some people have said that the cancer risk in Sydney is due to lifestyle. We do not support that hypothesis. These data control for that.

"Studies have shown that people in lower socio-economic groups are at higher risk for mortality. Why that is true we do not know."

One aspect that stood out was that rates of preventable cancers, like breast cancer and cervical cancer, were also higher than the rest of the province.

"Some people have said that the cancer risk in Sydney is due to lifestyle. We do not support that hypothesis."

"We have a problem in Cape Breton Island with breast cancer and cervical cancer because women do not get screened," said Guernsey.

Because of this finding, there is currently another study being conducted from the Nova Scotia Gynaecological Screening Program to find out how to improve rates of cancer screening.

But Dr. Guernsey says that low screening rates do not explain the city's high cancer rates, as rates of non-preventable cancers were

also high.

"If you look at stomach cancer, it's high. Lung cancer is high for women."

Carrie Bennet is a fourth-year science student at Dal, and is originally from Sydney. She says Dr. Guernsey's findings do not surprise her.

"For years everyone was saying that [cancer rates would] be higher anyway because of the Tar Ponds and steel plant. I've always assumed that it was higher," said Bennet. "I've known relatives and friends and friends' parents who have died or come down with cancer... I have two really close friends who lost parents and they were very young, in their forties.

And Bennet wasn't surprised with the low rates of cancer screening among Cape Breton women either.

"My mom knows a lot of people [who] still don't go for mammograms and they still don't go for their yearly pap test.

"I just take it for granted that everyone knows that you're supposed to go. I think younger women are doing it but older women are still not. Maybe they just don't know or they don't take it seriously enough. Or maybe they just don't want to find anything.

"When you're home and you're living there, you don't really think about it as this really big danger."

Dr. Guernsey, however, says

she can't make any predictions about the causes of the increased risk. But her next step will be to see if there is a link between cancer cases and employees at the Sysco steel plant.

"There were over 28,000 people employed at Sysco," Guernsey said. "We have their employment records. Our next step is to set up a database... to see if that explains the increased cancer risk.

"In our preliminary analysis of Sysco we have found much information about families of the workers — who was the spouse,

the children. We want to look not only at workers but at families as well. People come home from work with dusty clothes. Maybe the wife washing the clothes was exposed."

Dr. Andrew Padmos, commissioner of Cancer Care Nova Scotia and associate dean of Cancer Programs at Dalhousie Medical School says cancer experts have been called in from Ontario to review the available data and look for solutions to the Sydney cancer problem. A report is expected by the end of January 1999.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY

Application Deadline: December 18, 1998 or until the position is filled.

Position: Office/Clerical Staff

Location: Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3912
Killam Library, Office 4854
Dalhousie University
Halifax, NS B3H 4H8
902-494-8872 (FAX 902-494-6344)

Pay Rate:

\$10/ hour for minimum qualifications, \$15 per hour for experienced clerical/union background. Benefits and time off (sick leave, holidays, etc.) to be discussed.

Terms of Hiring:

A ten-hour work week, with some flexibility for scheduling.

Work Assignment:

The worker shall take instructions from the President or her designate of the local in regards to the setting of priorities for daily work distribution. The Executive shall approve the general direction of work activities to be implemented and the President shall communicate those activities to the office worker. Work activities shall include but not be limited to: typing of notices and Executive reports; distributing vital information to the general membership; distributing vital local information to the Executive members; directing members to appropriate Executive officer for action; distributing information to CUPE's website manager, filing and organizing archival material of the local; setting up proper filing systems; organizing information from CUPE National and CUPE Atlantic and distributing information to Executive officers; handling correspondence and arranging appointments/meetings for Executive members and Labour Management (or Joint) Committees; linking financial matters to the Secretary-Treasurer; safeguarding confidential information of all local members and maintaining a database of this information; advising CUPE Service Representative of local's needs.

Requirements of Position:

Basic knowledge of and ability to do word-processing, database management, email and other correspondence, filing, and general office management. Some familiarity with website operation will be considered an asset. The preferred candidate will also have some familiarity with work in an academic environment.

If you are interested in the above position, please apply by the application deadline with a letter of application and resumé (including the names of three references), to:

Barbara Moore
President Local 3912
Killam Library
Dalhousie University
Halifax, NS B3H 4H8

Inquiries about this position can be directed to cupe3912@is.dal.ca

Greenpeace warns of toxic toys

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country to ban phthalates in children's toys, and other European countries may soon follow suit.

And some toy manufacturers, such as Lego Group, have already eliminated PVC additives from their products. Greenpeace is calling for other toy manufacturers to do the same.

But some of those manufacturers, supported by chemical

innocuous," Guy said. "I would worry more about peanut butter. Some contents in peanut butter are known carcinogens as well, and we are not running around banning peanut butter.

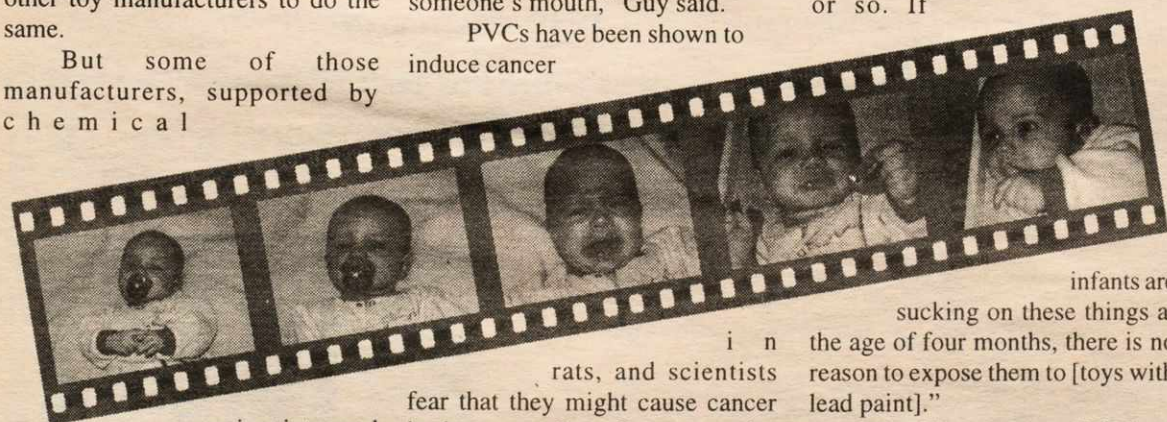
"If it can cause cancer, there is no reason why it should be in a product that will be put in someone's mouth," Guy said.

PVCs have been shown to induce cancer

cadmium, which "are not acceptable to be put into anything that children would be putting into their mouths."

He says Greenpeace should focus on the real problem of lead content in toy paint, and not PVCs.

"If it causes cancer in humans, it would show up in 20 years or so. If



infants are sucking on these things at the age of four months, there is no reason to expose them to [toys with lead paint]."

18 million tonnes of PVC are used globally, and Guy said it would be difficult to stop the production and usage of PVCs.

"I'm not a medical doctor, but in my opinion, the problem is a little over-stated," Guy said.

"But in my opinion, if the child doesn't need [vinyl toys], I wouldn't use them."

scientists and researchers, say PVCs are less harmful than Greenpeace is letting on.

Dr. Robert Guy, a professor of Chemistry at Dal, says that Greenpeace may be missing the point in their battle to ban children's PVC toys.

"PVC itself is relatively

in rats, and scientists fear that they might cause cancer in humans. But Guy says the experiments were misleading.

"When they did these experiments on the rats, they gave them enough phthalates that would be equivalent to us drinking two to three glasses [of PVC] per day," Guy said.

Dr. Guy says that pigments in some toys contain lead and