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Cancer cases found near Ford complex



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A cluster of cancers among adults and two cases of birth defects have been discovered in six houses on one street tucked up against Ford Motor Co.'s huge vinyl and paint plant complex in Mt. Clemens.

Within the last nine years, three persons living on or adjacent to Washington near Parkview, just southeast of the plants, have died of cancer, three persons (two still alive, one dead of other causes) have been diagnosed with cancer, and two children were born with birth defects.

Residents have complained about fumes, odor and visible particle fallout from Ford's paint and vinyl plants since the late 1960s. The plants were built in 1958 and expanded a dozen times to their present size and now employ more than 1,400 persons.

MERLIN DAMON, director of environmental health for the Macomb County Health Department, said 19 formal complaints about odor problems from the two factories have been received from residents since 1972.

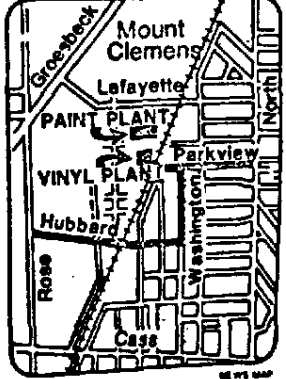
"Obviously, we have no way of knowing the validity of these reports. We haven't had any recent complaints about health problems or odor from the plants.

"We have no knowledge of the matter but would be glad to examine any scientific data made available to us."

The vinyl plant produces flat stock, knitted vinyl, welt, mylar moldings and exterior woodgrain for Ford cars and trucks. A second factory in the complex manufactures various automotive paints.

"I remember smelling the fumes when I was growing up and not thinking too much about it — but when my mother called and said

Continued on Page 4A



UPL 14313

Cancer tie-in near Ford plant

Continued from Page 1A
she had cancer, I got worried," said Steve Sharpe, 29.

MRS. JOYCE SHARPE, 54, is receiving treatment for lymphoma (cancer of the lymph system) in California. She moved west after having lived at 195 Washington for more than 20 years.

"My mother recalled neighbors who had died of cancer," Sharpe said. "There seems to be too many to just be coincidence."

After a call from Sharpe, The Detroit News searched out death certificates and interviewed victims and Washington Street residents, learning the following:

● Mrs. Kae Allyn Sargent, 42, died Feb. 10, 1977, of respiratory failure caused by carcinoma of the lung. A clerk in medical records at Mt. Clemens General Hospital, she lived at 204 Gallop, just across the street from Mrs. Sharpe.

● Gerald Kent Sargent, 46, her husband, died Jan. 26, 1980, of liver failure resulting from abdominal carcinomatosis and colon cancer.

● Mrs. Dorothy Thull, 48, died March 2, 1972, of liver and brain cancer that followed an initial diagnosis of carcinoma of the breast. A bank teller, Mrs. Thull lived at 87 Parkview, directly behind the Sargents' home.

● Carl J. Blohm, 72, of 187 Washington, died May 6, 1974, of cardiovascular collapse and respiratory failure. A retired cab-driver, he was receiving treatment for esophageal carcinoma and chronic obstructive lung disease.

● Mrs. Donna Michael, of 191 Washington, gave birth in 1973 to a handicapped child, diagnosed to have damage to the portion of the brain that controls motor nerves.

● Mrs. Cheryl Raub, 34, a nurse, gave birth to a normal, healthy daughter before she moved to 188 Washington in 1972. On Dec. 1, 1975, Mrs. Raub gave birth to a second daughter, Heather, who doctors say suffers from a "catalog of birth defects that defy labels." Among the maladies are two-way scoliosis, heart defects, bone joint

abnormalities and severe lung disease.

● Mrs. Raub had her left eye removed surgically in May 1978 after doctors diagnosed a rare form of cancer called a melanoma.

SUCH CLUSTERING of cancer and birth defects is not unheard of in the scientific and medical communities. But experts disagree on the Mt. Clemens situation's significance.

Dr. Janette Sherman, a Detroit physician specializing in treating cancer patients and an adviser to

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federal authorities on the Love Canal chemical dumping crisis in Niagara Falls, N.Y., said: "That's exactly how Love Canal got started."

"There were a number of cases of women having a difficult time conceiving and, when they did give birth, the children were damaged. Cancer has a long latency period, but I think what you have found (on Washington Street) is more than coincidence."

Dr. Robert Miller, head of epidemiology for the National Cancer Institute in Washington, told The News, on the other hand:

"From the combination of diagnoses you have provided, it is hard to get a handle on something that might be environmentally related. You have different malfunctions, different tumors. Normally, cluster studies are warranted if you have enough of the same type of a particular tumor."

DR. GLYN CALDWELL, chief of the cancer branch at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, commented:

"One out of four persons in America will get cancer. Is what you have found unusual? Yes, no and maybe. I don't mean to be facetious, but we'd have to define a population and a specific area to determine if the clustering was more than coincidence."

Most cancer experts agree that the identification of particular, rare tumors in the presence of clearly definable exposures to a known carcinogen (cancer-causing agent) can establish a cause-effect relationship.

This theory, called site-specificity, was used in identifying the toxicity of vinyl chloride (VC) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC), substances federally regulated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In 1974, B.F. Goodrich announced that three PVC workers at a Louisville

AIR SAMPLES taken Jan. 31, 1974, by federal investigators found a mixture of solvents (MEK, toluene, xylene and tetrahydrofuran) in levels twice as high as federally permitted exposure limits and in one sample, three times higher.

A return federal inspection in October 1975, after Ford installed new engineering controls, found measurable toxic levels — but all within OSHA exposure limits.

"I remember growing up on Washington, and we always knew what kind of paint they were making that day," recalled Steve Sharpe.

"If you had a white car and Ford was making burgundy paint you could tell by the flakes that would collect on your car. There were paint particles flying through the air all the time."

MRS. CHERYL RAUB, who like Sharpe has since moved from Washington Street, said she has only a series of nagging, inexplicable thoughts:

"I'm a nurse. I can't point my finger and say it was Ford that caused my baby's condition or my cancer."

"I can say two things — one, no one can tell me why my daughter is like she is. No one knows if it was medication, air pollutants, additives in food or what. No one has seen a child with the multiple birth defects that she has."

"Two, no one knows what caused my melanoma. It's rare in people as young as I am."

Dr. T.N. Weng, who treated Heather Raub, said the child, with her heart, lung and bone problems, is "absolutely unique" and a mystery to doctors at Detroit Children's Hospital.

"We determined the birth defects were not from chromosome damage or from a genetic problem," Dr. Weng said. "Every doctor before me washed their hands of the case because there was nothing to do. In Heather's case, the cause is just not known."

plant had died of a rare liver cancer (angiosarcoma) within a three-year period.

SUBSEQUENT scientific reports, both private and federal, identified VC and PVC as potent carcinogens, capable of causing not only the rare liver cancer but also cancers of the kidney, brain, lung, urinary tract, digestive system and lymphatic system.

In 1970, Bernard Campau, a sergeant in the Mt. Clemens Police Department, filed a lawsuit against Ford, charging that his daughter's asthma condition was aggravated by "a vinyl-like odor and a mistlike substance" being emitted from smokestacks on the factory roofs.

Campau was awarded a \$7,500 consent judgment. Ford officials said the payment was not an admission of guilt, but was made in the interest of community relations.

Extensive internal investigations were conducted at the Mt. Clemens complex in the 1970s by Ford engineers and county, state and federal officials. They specifically studied workers' exposure to such toxic chemicals as vinyl chloride (VC), methyl ethyl ketone (MEK), lead, cadmium and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB).

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