Public Health Response to Reported Concerns About Cancer

Cyrus Rangan, M.D., F.A.A.P., F.A.C.M.T.
Marita Santos, R.N., M.S.N.
Investigating a Reported “Cluster”

1. Gather background information
2. Administer survey
3. Review scientific literature
4. Consult Cancer Registry
5. Determine whether true cluster exists
Malibu High School

33 COMPLETED SURVEYS

• 27 Current Staff + 6 Retired Staff
• Age Range: 30-75 years old
• Ethnicity: 91% Caucasian, 3% Latino & 6% African American
• Few reports of a cancer diagnosis, consisting of different types of cancers
Cabrillo Elementary School

11 COMPLETED SURVEYS

• 10 Current Staff + 1 Retired Staff
• Age Range: 40-77 years old
• Ethnicity: 91% Caucasian and 9% Latino
• Few reports of a cancer diagnosis, consisting of different types of cancers
Thyroid Cancer

• 1% of all cancers in the U.S.
• Incidence rates 2 to 3 times higher in women. (45,000 out of 60,000 per year, and increasing)
• Within “thyroid cancer” there are many variants: (papillary, follicular, medullary, anaplastic)
• Higher rates seen in:
  – Iceland
  – Hawaii
  – Philippines (also Filipino immigrant population)

Risk Factors for Thyroid Cancer

• High-dose exposure to ionizing radiation:
  - Radiation treatment for medical conditions or dental work
• Iodine Deficiency
• Obesity
• Family history
Risk Factors for Thyroid Cancer

• History of thyroid conditions:
  – Goiter
  – Benign thyroid nodules/adenomas
  – Thyroiditis/Hashimoto’s Thyroiditis
  – Cowden Disease
California Teachers Study

• Cohort of active and retired female teachers and administrators, 1995-2008 (n=117,646)

• Increased risk of thyroid cancer for:
  – Later menses (≥14 years)
  – Longer menstrual cycles (>30 days)
  – Recent pregnancy (within past 5 years)
Defining *Cancer*

Context with other diseases

- Different infections have different causes and different courses of treatment

- Different types of cancer diagnoses have:
  - Different causes
  - Different courses of treatment
  - Different rates of occurrence
  - Different chances for survival
Facts About Cancers

• Cancers are a group of more than 100 diseases characterized by uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells.

• The term *cancer* has been used to describe all of these diseases, leading to the viewpoint of cancer as a single disease.
Facts About Cancers

• Cancers are more common than most people realize
  – Cancers are now the leading cause of death in the U.S. in people under age 80
  – Approx. 30-40% of Americans will get a cancer at some point in their lives
  – Cancers will strike 3 out of 4 families
Facts About Cancers

• Diagnosis of a cancer increases with age and medical care advances
  – More Americans are leading longer and healthier lives, and surviving into their later years, so we expect to see more cancers in our rapidly aging population
  – Increased awareness, screening, and development of diagnostic techniques contribute to increased incidence and prevalence of some cancers
Causes of Cancer in the U.S.

- Tobacco: 30%
- Dietary Factors: 30%
- Radiation / UV exposure: 2%
- Environmental Pollution: 2%
- Prescription Drugs: 1%
- Salt and Food Additives: 1%
- Reproductive Factors: 3%
- Socioeconomic Status: 3%
- Alcohol: 3%
- Viruses / Biological Agents: 5%
- Family History of Cancer: 5%
- Perinatal Factors / Growth: 5%
- Occupation: 5%
- Sedentary Lifestyle: 5%
- Environmental Pollution: 2%

What is a Cancer Cluster?

• A *cancer cluster* is the occurrence of a greater than expected number of cases of cancer within a group of people, a geographic area, or a period of time.

Source: National Cancer Institute
Perceived Cancer Cluster

• What the public *perceives* is a cluster of cancer is different from how scientists define it

• A community’s perception may reflect an elevated rate of cancer, or it may not
Cluster Characteristics

- People living in the same area may have commonalities based on where they live.

- Examples:
  - Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in West Hollywood
  - Breast cancer in Beverly Hills
  - Stomach cancer in East Los Angeles, Koreatown, and Chinatown
Comparing Cancer Rates

Distribution of Relative Risk for Lung and Bronchus Cancers (All Types)
Addressing Concerns

• Cancer clusters are a real phenomenon.

• However, 85% of reported cancer clusters show no actual elevations in cancer rates

• They only appear to be clusters because of common misconceptions about cancers
Misconceptions

• People have a tendency to see patterns in random events
• Truly random patterns often don’t appear random to us
• “Law of Small Numbers”
• “Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy”
Criteria for a Cancer Cluster

• 10-1,000 times higher rate of cancer
  – E.g. Leukemia & radiation from Chernobyl

• Rare type of cancer
  – E.g. Mesothelioma & asbestos

• Cancer seen in new age group
  – E.g. Cervical cancer & diethylstilbestrol (DES)
What does this mean for Malibu?

• Common cancers

• Common age groups

• No evidence of meaningful cluster in Malibu vicinity
Map of Census Tracts at High Risk in L.A. County

Source: Cancers in the Urban Environment, Mack, T., 2004
Map of Census Tracts at High Risk in L.A. County, adjusted for Social Class

Source: Cancers in the Urban Environment, Mack, T., 2004
Environmental Link to Cancer?

• Numerous substances have been identified by scientific agencies as potential carcinogens

• May be responsible for any individual’s cancer

• Despite lack of a cluster, it is still difficult to tie any individual’s cancer diagnosis to an environmental source
Environmental Link to Cancer?

• If you have mesothelioma, there is virtually a 100% chance that asbestos is the cause

• If you have cervical cancer, there is a very high chance that HPV is the major cause

• For most other cancers, the causes are multifactorial
Environmental Link to Cancer?

- Known human carcinogens: asbestos, arsenic, benzene, ionizing radiation, inhaled hexavalent chromium, vinyl chloride

- Circumstances of exposure influence the contribution of these factors
Environmental Link to Cancer?

- **Known:** *sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity* in humans

- **Probable:** *limited evidence of carcinogenicity* in humans and *sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity* in experimental animals

- **Possible:** *limited evidence of carcinogenicity* in humans and less than *sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity* in experimental animals, or *inadequate evidence of carcinogenicity* in humans but there is *sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity* in experimental animals
What about PCBs?

- PCBs “upgraded” from probable to known in March 2013

- Based on epidemiological association between PCB exposure and increased risk of melanoma in humans. Limited evidence from small studies suggesting increased risks of non-Hodgkin lymphoma and breast cancer

- Liver cancer in rats
What about PCBs?

• Most consistent human disease finding with PCB exposure is chloracne

• More research is needed on PCBs to determine potential human impact
Should I be worried about PCBs at Malibu?

• Studies are based on plausible mechanisms of exposure (ingestion) and potential accumulation of PCBs over time

• Chronic inhalation in workers associated with respiratory tract symptoms, such as cough and tightness of the chest, gastrointestinal effects including anorexia, weight loss, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain, mild liver effects, and effects on the skin and eyes, such as chloracne, skin rashes, and eye irritation
Should I be worried about PCBs at Malibu?

- Environmental testing at Malibu has revealed the presence of PCBs in caulking

- Lack of data to determine contribution to overall PCB exposure
Should I be worried about PCBs at Malibu?

• Link between PCB exposure to human disease at Malibu can not and should not be determined by environmental testing

• Testing begets testing. Good scientific methods suggest the need for endpoints
Should I be worried about PCBs at Malibu?

- DPH does not find evidence of unusual cancer rates or occurrences at Malibu

- DPH does not recommend further testing of the school environment to establish correlations with human disease
Contact Information

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health
Environmental Health
Toxics Epidemiology Program

Phone: (213) 738-3220
Email: tox@ph.lacounty.gov
Website: http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/TEA/ToxicEpi/index_ToxicsEpi.htm
References

• USC Cancer Registry/Los Angeles Cancer Surveillance Program
  http://uscnorriscancer.usc.edu/about/programs/la_county.html

• National Cancer Institute
  http://www.cancer.gov/

• California Teachers Study
  http://calteachersstudy.org/
Q & A
Causes of Cancer in the U.S.