

Report backs pending legislation to investigate disease clusters

In Kettleman City, California, a town of 1,620 people, 11 babies were born with severe birth defects in the last three years. Meanwhile, at least 60 men who lived on the Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base in North Carolina from the late 1950s into the 1980s have developed breast cancer. And residents in Wellington, Ohio are three times more likely to develop multiple sclerosis than in the rest of the country.

A new report highlights these and 39 other so-called ‘disease clusters’—defined as unusual aggregations, real or perceived, of health events grouped together in time and space—that have been confirmed or are currently being identified by a local, state or federal agency in 13 US states since 1976. The 28 March report from two nonprofit organizations, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the National Disease Clusters Alliance, calls for expanded federal efforts to identify clusters and their causes.

“The report is pretty convincing,” says Melissa Bondy, director of the Childhood Cancer Epidemiology and Prevention Center, a joint endeavor of the Baylor

College of Medicine and the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. “There’s a lot of perception that there’s a problem with disease clusters, and I think that the only way we’re going to know for sure is to investigate them properly.”

“Communities are worried about elevated disease rates,” adds Sarah Janssen, an NRDC senior scientist and a coauthor of the recent report. “There is a real need for thorough investigations in the communities where no one has come in to see whether or not a disease cluster exists.”

Pending legislation might help address the issue. A US Senate bill introduced in January called the Strengthening Protections for Children and Communities From Disease Clusters Act proposes to improve coordination between federal and state agencies and create guidelines for investigations. (The bill is also known as ‘Trevor’s Law’, named for Trevor Schaefer, a brain cancer survivor who was diagnosed with the illness at the same time as others in his small Idaho community; an environmental cause was neither found nor ruled out.)

Ross Brownson, an epidemiologist at Washington University in St. Louis who previously oversaw cluster investigations at the Missouri Department of Health, says that more scrutiny of clusters is necessary: “It’s good to bring attention to this issue and to think about it in a multifaceted way—to look at environmental issues, make use of the public health survey data we have and ensure that we’re not investing all of our resources on a few clusters.”

Patricia Buffler, an epidemiologist at the University of California–Berkeley who has studied cancer clusters for three decades, praised the groups for calling for systematically reviewing clusters and federal funding. But she questions the report’s conclusion that, as she puts it, “you see a cluster in a community, that there must be an environmental cause.” Although environmental contaminants were implicated in every documented cluster, only one mentioned in the report had a confirmed cause: asbestos contamination from a mine in Montana led to an outbreak of respiratory disease.

Alisa Opar

Jackson Laboratory’s foray into Florida faces murky future

Lately, it seems as if the Bar Harbor, Maine–based Jackson Laboratory, famous for its research on mammalian genetics, cannot catch a break in its efforts to build a satellite research facility in Florida. Since 2003, the state has heavily recruited biomedical institutions including Scripps, Max Planck, Torrey Pines, Sanford-Burnham and the Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute (*Nat. Med.* **16**, 1066–1069, 2010). But its attempts to engage Jackson Labs have been fraught with delays and setbacks.

As recently as the spring of 2010, Jackson Labs was in talks to locate its new branch in Naples, Florida. However, according to Tammie Nemecek, president of the Economic Development Council of Collier County, which includes Naples, that effort fell through when the state failed to fully finance its innovation fund, which would have provided Jackson Labs with \$100 million to construct its facility, for two years in a row. Nemecek says that under then-governor Charlie Crist, “you didn’t have that leadership at state level where you got the strategy and funding to do it.”

Critics of economic analyses conducted for Collier County argued that plans put forth by Jackson Labs included overly optimistic estimates of the number of jobs the project would create.

The saga concerning the Jackson Labs satellite has been back in the news since last month when the Florida State House approved a new, consolidated State Economic Enhancement and Development trust fund from which the money to build the

Jackson Labs Florida satellite could be drawn.

Since the Collier County plans broke down, Jackson Labs has turned its attention to Sarasota County, Florida. An analysis conducted by officials in Sarasota County “projected that this project would more than repay the state’s investment,” says Mike Hyde, vice president for advancement at Jackson Labs.

Under newly elected governor Rick Scott, all economic development plans must demonstrate an ability to pay back the state’s investment in cumulative tax revenues within a 20-year time period. Sarasota County’s analysis indicates the state will collect \$130 million in tax revenue over 20 years on its \$100 million investment, but “the only analysis that will count is the one that will be done by Enterprise Florida, the state’s official estimators of economic impact,” says Hyde.

Moreover, as the state legislature, which is currently in session, reshuffles its mechanisms for funding job-creating industries, it’s unclear whether the approximately \$100 million in funds from the state required to initialize the project will be authorized this year. The legislature, which is wrestling with a \$3.7 billion budget shortfall and cuts to services such as state pensions, finishes its current session on 6 May.

Doug Holder, Florida state representative for Sarasota County, is optimistic that Jackson Labs will come to his district, eventually. “I’m setting my sights on next year, but we will push this year as hard as we possibly can,” he says.

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