

Glaser

Electric Currents and Leukemia Show Puzzling Links in New Study

By SANDRA BLAKESLEE

Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, Feb. 7 — Preliminary results of a new scientific study show that childhood leukemia is not associated with household exposure to electromagnetic fields. But, in a finding that scientists say is baffling, the cancer is associated with proximity to power lines and the use of certain appliances like hair dryers.

In a break from normal scientific protocol, an industry group, the Electric Power Research Institute, made a summary of the study public today despite objections from the scientist who led it.

The scientist, Dr. John Peters, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Southern California, said in a written statement that he was not ready to discuss the study publicly because it has not yet been routinely reviewed for accuracy by other scientists before publication in a journal. Such publication is expected in about four months.

But Dr. George Hidy, vice president of the power research institute's environmental division, said his group decided to publicize the study today to coincide with Dr. Peters's presentation of his data to a group of epidemiologists from around the country. The closed meeting, sponsored by the institute in Carmel, Calif., was to discuss future epidemiological studies on the health effects of electromagnetic radiation.

Adds to Confusion

Electromagnetic fields are routinely produced when electrical current passes through a wire or common household appliance.

The new study adds more confusion to an already labyrinthine scientific controversy over whether electromagnetic fields pose a threat to public health. A draft report by the Environmental Protection Agency concluded in December that there was enough evidence of a possible link between cancer and low-level electromagnetic fields from power lines and appliances to warrant new research.

Earlier studies suffered a major problem, Dr. Hidy said, in that exposure to electromagnetic fields was never measured accurately. It was assumed that nearby power lines created such fields inside homes, he said, but true exposures were unknown.

In 1986, the power institute asked Dr. Peters to include electromagnetic fields in a Los Angeles study of childhood leukemia under way at the time. The power institute paid for that part of his study.

In the study, Dr. Peters examined the lives of 464 children under the age of 10. Half had leukemia and half did not. Each leukemia patient was compared with a healthy child of the same age, sex, race and geographic area. Parents were interviewed by telephone about occupation, household use of chemicals, smoking, drug use and daily activities, including exposure to electrical appliances.

Unlike those who conducted earlier studies, Dr. Peters's group entered homes and took direct measurements of the electric and magnetic fields. A recording device was placed in each child's bedroom to measure such fields every minute for 24 hours. Measurements were made with a field meter at several locations in and around the house both when most appliances were turned on and when they were off.

Finally, power lines in the neighborhood as well as the thickness of the wires and their distance from the house, were examined. A house located near a transmission line was assumed

Making the study public upsets the chief researcher.

to have higher exposure to fields than houses farther away and the exposed were estimated from that.

According to the institute, there was no association between childhood leukemia and measures of exposure to electric fields.

The institute said that children exposed to the strongest electric fields had a very weak but not statistically significant increase in leukemia risk. Oddly, children in homes with moderate magnetic field exposures had a lower cancer risk than children in homes with the least exposures.

Like previous studies, however, there was an association between neighborhood power lines and the risk for childhood leukemia. The normal risk of childhood leukemia is 1 in 20,000 a year, the institute said, and the children with the greatest exposure to power lines had a risk of 2.5 in 20,000.

This finding remains baffling, Dr. Hidy said. Perhaps power lines emit sporadic field fluxes that are not being measured properly, he said, or other factors may be involved such as air-born contaminants from wire insulation.

Most worrisome from a parent's point of view was the association between some household appliances and increased cancer risk, Dr. Hidy said. Children who used electric hair dryers or sat in front of black-and-white televisions had the highest cancer risk. Dr. Hidy did not provide a precise estimate of the increased risk.

Although these were the strongest associations in the study, said Dr. Hidy, the method used to ascertain them was inherently weak. Parents were asked to recall what appliances their children used, he said, and because their children were sick perhaps they looked for agents to blame it on.

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FOOD INDUSTRY SAYS FDA BUDGET PLAN FAVORS DRUGS, MEDICAL DEVICES

The food processing industry today expressed concern over a proposed 1992 budget for the Food and Drug Administration that includes new user fees and further widens the funding gap between support for FDA work related to drugs and medical devices and for food.

John R. Cady, President of the National Food Processors Association, said the proposal "misses the mark" in terms of strengthening FDA's food-related activities. He noted that only \$28 million of the proposed \$80 million increase would go to support the agency's food programs. "This falls far short of making up for decreases in spending for the food program over the past decade," Cady said.

"Although foods represent more than 80% of the dollar value of products regulated by FDA, only about one-fourth of the agency's current budget supports food-related activities and now it will be even less," Cady said.

"In its budget, FDA proposes funds to begin implementing the FDA Revitalization Act introduced by Senator Hatch and enacted by the last Congress. Congress must make this its top priority for FDA," Cady said.