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Several studies found elevated cancer rates near Three Mile Island

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The Jan. 12 letter "Anti-nuclear argument flawed" from Dr. Letty Goodman Lutzker provided your readership with a textbook example of "junk science." Lutzker produced an unscientific and emotional argument in support of nuclear power: "These studies include those by the National Cancer Institute examining 90,000 deaths both near to and distant from nuclear plants, and by a Three Mile Island citizens' group after the accident 25 years ago that found no health effects from the small amount of radioactivity released."

The facts relating to Three Mile Island and health effects are well documented. There were door-to-door surveys conducted by citizens living close to TMI. Field research documented increased cancer incidences and mortalities in population pockets saturated by radioactive plumes.

In 1984, the first Voluntary Community Health Study was undertaken by a group of local residents trained by Marjorie Aamodt. That study found a 600 percent cancer death rate increase for three locations on the west shore of TMI directly in the plumes' pathway. The data were independently verified by experts from the TMI Public Health Fund.

The following year, Jane Lee surveyed 409 families living in a housing development five miles from TMI. Lee documented 23 cancer deaths, 45 cancer incidences, 53 benign tumors, 31 miscarriages, stillbirths and deformities, and 204 cases of respiratory problems.

These local efforts were matched and documented by area researchers: Richard E. Webb moved to Harrisburg to conduct a health assessment. His Report on Infant Deaths found a "clear statistically significant increase of infant deaths in Dauphin County" in 1979 following the TMI accident. Webb used the Pennsylvania Health Department's vital statistics.

A Penn State professor, Winston Richards, reported, "Infant mortality for Dauphin County, while average in 1978, becomes significantly above average in 1980. Death from leukemia, while average in 1979, is very close to above average in 1980, and deaths from cancer for ages 45-64, while average for 1978, become decidedly significantly above average for 1980."

James Fenwick, a researcher at Millersville University, found statistically significant increases of prostate, bladder and urinary cancers in men; increased kidney, renal, pelvis and ovarian cancer in women; and small increases in thyroid cancers among men and women. (April 1998)

Since Lutzker presented no documentation, I must presume the citizens' study she alluded to is the much-maligned Pennsylvania Department of Health's report released in September 1985. That study's protocol was ridiculed and criticized by epidemiologists at Harvard and Penn State for diluting increases in cancer by expanding the population base to include people living outside the 10-mile study zone. More specifically, the health department placed 28,610 people who lived five miles outside of TMI as actually living within five miles of the plant. And another 122,000 people who lived farther than 10 miles from the plant were included in the population of those living within 10 miles.

Unfortunately, none of these studies evaluated the health impact to members of our community who worked on the cleanup of Three Mile Island-2. GPU Nuclear did not maintain a health or cancer registry from 1979-1989, even though 5,000 cleanup workers received "measurable doses" of radiation exposure during the TMI-2 defueling.

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