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NSW Health Expert Panel finds higher incidence of cancer due to chance

An expert panel formed to look into rates of childhood leukaemia and lymphoma in the Helensburgh area has found that the higher rate of leukaemia observed between 2005 and 2008 is most likely to have arisen by chance, while rates of lymphoma are within the normal range found in NSW.

NSW Health convened the expert panel after residents raised concerns about the number of leukaemia and lymphoma cases among children in Helensburgh.

The panel included experts in cancer, public health, paediatrics, epidemiology, environmental health and toxicology. The panel reviewed an analysis of the frequency of cases of leukaemia and lymphoma in Helensburgh from 1996 to 2011.

The panel noted that there were more cases of leukaemia than expected between 2005 and 2008, while no cases of leukaemia were found in the period 1996 to 2004. Rates of lymphoma were within the expected range.

The panel also considered the findings of an environmental investigation conducted by the Illawarra Public Health Unit that reviewed past and current land use in the area and past pollution incidents that may have occurred. The panel found no evidence that the Helensburgh community was at increased risk due to environmental exposures.

Based on the Panel's findings and the results of an environmental investigation by the Illawarra Public Health Unit, the panel has advised that environmental testing is not recommended.

Head of the Cancer Control Program, South East Sydney Local Health District, Professor Bernard Stewart, who is also a member of the panel, said the rate of relatively uncommon diseases like leukaemia and lymphoma inevitably vary by chance from very high to very low when looking at one age group in a single postcode area.

"The number of cases of childhood leukaemia and lymphoma which has arisen in Helensburgh is most likely due to chance," Professor Stewart said.

"We have examined the frequency of leukaemia and lymphoma and the results of the environmental investigations undertaken by the Public Health Unit and the panel has found that no environmental pollutant or other abnormal circumstance was implicated and that no further environmental sampling is warranted at this time."

The Illawarra Public Health Unit will continue to communicate with the community and monitor cases of childhood cancer in Helensburgh and the broader Illawarra area.

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