

Cancer analysis won't be made public, OHA says

Written by Tracy Loew Statesman Journal
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The Oregon Health Authority won't release the results of a statewide analysis of osteosarcoma cases, citing federal health privacy laws.

State Rep. Vicki Berger, R-Salem, requested the analysis, of cases reported to the state's cancer registry, more than a month ago, in connection with a string of childhood osteosarcoma cases in West Salem.

In a Feb. 26 telephone interview, Jae Douglas, head of OHA's Center for Prevention and Health Promotion, told the Statesman Journal that the analysis had been completed and would soon be released.

"(Berger) had asked for a look at the broader context for how does Oregon compare with other states? How does Polk and Marion county compare with other Oregon counties," Douglas said Feb. 26. "Those data have been pulled. They're under internal review now. We're just working on the formatting, the form of how to communicate them."

But this week, an OHA spokeswoman said the document is protected by the 1996 Health Insurance Portability Act, or HIPAA, which prohibits the release of individually identifiable health information.

A previously released analysis of osteosarcoma cases in four Salem census districts now also falls under that protection as well, spokeswoman Susan Wickstrom said in an email.

That analysis showed a higher-than expected number of osteosarcoma cases in West Salem. But health officials said the sample was too small to be meaningful — prompting Berger to ask for the statewide analysis.

At least five West Salem children were diagnosed with osteosarcoma between 2008 and 2012.

In response to a community petition, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spent 14 months and more than \$100,000 looking for soil contaminants that could explain the cancer cases.

Last month, EPA announced it had found nothing in the soil that could explain the cases.

On Friday, the Oregon Health Authority sent a letter to Berger summing up the investigation to date, but not including any information about the statewide analysis.

"It wasn't exactly what I was looking for," Berger said Monday. "The only thing I can say is I'm still asking questions, and I'll continue to."

The letter said OHA had consulted Donald Austin, professor emeritus at the Oregon Health & Science University about the case.

Austin agrees, the letter said, that the Public Health Department has "exhausted all the investigative public health tools at their disposal."

Austin was the main architect of Oregon's cancer registry, which was established in 1995. He could not be

reached for comment.

In the late February interview, Douglas said that in the absence of a common environmental exposure linking the children, it would be difficult to characterize the West Salem cancer cases as a cancer cluster.

“Posing the question, is this a cancer cluster or not? It is not really an answerable question at this point,” she said.

Rep. Mitch Greenlick, chair of the House Health Care Committee, said he had demanded a copy of the analysis, and on Monday had received a rough map of cases across Oregon.

Greenlick, D-Portland, said the lack of a known cause for the cases shouldn’t stall the investigation.

“They’ve just sort of thrown up their hands because of that. I would like them to continue trying to puzzle this thing out,” Greenlick said. “I just don’t think that cluster could have happened by chance.”

tloew@statesmanjournal.com, (503) 399-6779 or follow at [Twitter.com/SJWatchdog](https://twitter.com/SJWatchdog)