

Cancer rates concern parents

Residents of Upland are concerned by the number of leukemia cases among kids.

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Claremont-Upland Voice

UPLAND — Since several parents recently complained to Upland school board members about a fear of increased cases of leukemia in the district, school officials have pledged to look into the matter. But experts who have studied the cancer ratio in the area say the rate is normal.

Eva Claustro is an Upland parent whose children Elizabeth, 10, and Christian, 9, attend Pepper Tree Elementary School. Christian was diagnosed with leukemia in 1999.

"We all live within the same area, just blocks within each other," she said. "It seems like every year there is a new case diagnosed and it's the same kind."

Rita Loof's daughter Sarah, 6, who attends Valencia Elementary School, is healthy, but Loof remains concerned.

"If something is out there, I don't want to be a sitting duck and wait for it to happen to my child," she said. "I'd like to see them find the experts and fund some kind of a study or investigation to look at why the cancer rate seems to be higher in this area."

Claustro and Loof were among the parents who said that several children have contracted the disease since 1995. They did not have specific statistics, but suggested that school and city leaders test the area's soil and air quality.

District officials said the concerns have come out of the city's northwest side near Valencia and Pepper Tree elementary schools. Officials said they reported the concern to representatives for San Bernardino County Supervisor Paul Biane as well as Thomas Prendergast, head of the county's public health

department, and John Morgan, cancer epidemiologist and head of the California Cancer Registry at Loma Linda University.

There have been 13 new cancer cases among children younger than 15 in the Upland and the surrounding areas from 1988 through 2002, according to a study by the Registry released last year. The study was conducted in response to concern from parents in Upland.

But the number of new cases did not reveal significant differences from what was common for Upland's demographics, according to the study. Citing the Harvard Report on Cancer Prevention, the study's authors also asserted that, "the general public tends to overestimate the role of external environmental factors . . . as causes of cancer," and that, "external environmental exposures account for a relatively small fraction of cancer deaths."

Efforts to reach Morgan were

unsuccessful. District parents are researching to find if any new cases have been diagnosed since the study. If new cases were reported, it might be wise to take another look at the issue, Prendergast said.

"We have to deal with people's concerns without prejudging the answer as to whether there is or is not anything unusual going on," he said. "We have to listen to those again before we say if there is a reason for them to be concerned."

Prendergast said the type of cancer, proximity of diagnosed cases and the time between when each person is afflicted would determine whether such a problem exists.

"We're taking it very serious," Upland schools Supt. Pete Watson said. "If there is a question about cancer or about anything that is dealing with public health, we want to make sure we get the right experts in contact with the people that have the questions."