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### University has done all it can to understand deaths

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By Gerald S. Cohen

Every parent understands there is no pain greater than burying a son or daughter. So when we at Susquehanna University learned about four young alumni who died in 2002 from cancer, we experienced sadness and a sense of loss for the parents and families, as well as our community.

Since then, we have engaged in countless hours of soul-searching. On our own, we initiated discussions with health experts, toxicologists and pathologists to determine whether these deaths resulted from random chance or something more sinister. After examinations by our own experts, as well as by state officials, we are now left with one irrefutable conclusion: These deaths were not associated with anything in Selinsgrove's environment.

A May 2007 study by the state Department of Environmental Protection, the most extensive in the department's history, found no evidence of environmental contaminants that would pose an immediate risk to the public. Nor did the study find any residual contamination showing past exposure that would have exposed anyone to an unacceptable risk.

Further, state data show that for the years in question, Selinsgrove's residents had cancer rates 10 percent below the expected rate. Common sense would suggest that if the environment in Selinsgrove had been contaminated, we would have seen higher-than-expected incidents of cancer among the borough's residents -- the people who have spent their lives here, not just four years.

An epidemiological study completed last month by the state Department of Health supported these conclusions. It found no evidence of environmental exposure to cancer associated with attendance at Susquehanna University. The study, which compared the health records of nearly 10,000 Susquehanna alumni with cancer registry data in Pennsylvania, showed elevated rates of melanoma (skin cancer) and testicular cancer. Significantly neither of these cancers is caused by environmental factors, the state said.

Why did these two cancers exceed expected rates? In comparing Susquehanna alumni with Pennsylvania's general population, DOH adjusted the data to account only for variations in age and gender. The study did not adjust for any other factors that the state acknowledges could affect the outcome, including race, religion or socioeconomic status. We know, for example, that melanoma and testicular cancer occur at significantly higher rates in whites. For the years in question, our student population ranged from about 92 percent to 97 percent white, more than 10 percent higher than the comparative population in Pennsylvania.

It is important to note that state officials told us they would expect results like ours if they were to conduct a similar study with another university. We and DOH officials also know of no other university that has participated in such a study. As a result, we can now say with greater certainty than any other university in the nation that our environment is safe.

In truth, we did not need an eight-month investigation by The Patriot-News to help us understand our obligation to fully examine the cause of these deaths. We also do not believe the newspaper ever presented a rational argument supporting its speculation about a cancer cluster in Selinsgrove. Central to The Patriot-News' series was the suggestion that the four students had lived in an off-campus area that might have been contaminated by benzene. Even if you accepted the notion that the students had come in contact with the benzene, the students died from several cancer types, none of which is caused by benzene. The paper also mentioned the existence of dangerous levels of pesticides, but the DEP study dismissed this possibility.

Sadly, the newspaper never reported on the former students' family or medical history, where they lived before or after Susquehanna, or their potential exposure to risk factors through work and lifestyle. We, of course, welcome the clarity these investigations have brought to the debate over the quality of Selinsgrove's environment, but this clarity came with a cost. The newspaper series, beginning with an 81/2-page Sunday spread, needlessly worried residents, our alumni, students and staff. For two years the university lived under a cloud.

For some, no amount of evidence will be convincing. And for the grief-stricken families of the deceased, the results might not be enough to bring closure. Nevertheless, we know that cancer afflicts 25 percent of Americans, and it is not always possible to explain who will succumb and why.

We are confident that the institution has done all within its power to get to the bottom of these deaths. Now it is time for us to move on with the certainty and conviction that we live, work and study in a safe place.

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