Database of students exposed to vermiculite requested at CAG

■ Collection, monitoring better suited to several agencies, says federal official

BY ROGER MORRIS
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A data base and subsequent research on Plummer Elementary School students exposed to asbestos-contaminated vermiculite would probably be best handled by a variety of organizations and agencies, the Citizens Advisory Group heard Thursday night.

"It's an ongoing process," said Dan Strausbaugh, local spokesman for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

ATSDR, the genetic research team at the University of Montana, the state health officials and other agencies are all working to expand the database on Libby-area people exposed to vermiculite and diagnosed with asbestos-related disease, he said.

CAG member Cyrus Lee said he was not asking for a medical testing but creation of a data base specific to children who attended the school and were exposed to vermiculite placed near the playground for an old ice skating rink. The rink was constructed in the mid to late 1970s. The EPA found the asbestos-contaminated material in spring 2001 still on the soil surface in that area.

"A serious situation continues to exist for children who attended Plummer School and were exposed," Lee said in a prepared statement read during the meeting. "Parents should have the ability to monitor."

Previously, ATSDR officials said it wasn't reasonable or safe to expose children to potentially harmful x-rays looking for asbestos-related disease when experience says the disease doesn't appear for 10-20 years and sometimes longer after exposure.

Strausbaugh said the overall effort should have involved more agency and at different levels of government.

Lee asked if there have been any new discoveries with treating the disease. He also suggested the children be used as a study group to further research.

"As Superfund moves into action we need to focus on members of the community," Lee said. "If a medical breakthrough comes tomorrow, are we prepared to put it into effect?"

More than 800 local residents have been diagnosed with some form of asbestos-related disease, most of them since the Environmental Protection Agency responded in November 1999 to requests for an investigation into a former vermiculite mine and processing operations that existed in the Libby area until 1990.

Asbestos victim advocate Gayle Benefield agreed to work with Lee.

"More needs to be done for the Plummer School children," she said. "We need to find someone who can watch them. We can't wait 20 years to see what happens."

The creation of a database is an enormous task, too big for the cash-strapped school district, Superintendent Kirby Maki said. Many of the students with potential exposures moved with families away from the area and others are now adults.

"We don't have the personnel or the resources to track everyone down," Maki said. "When we track them down what are we going to tell them?"

CAG member Rick Palagi suggested the board write a letter requesting help. "We still have a need for a technical assistance person as we expect the public health union," Palagi said.

Jim Christiansen, who will be the Superfund project manager in Libby, said technical assistance grants would be available as soon as the site is listed. "I'm sure there will be a grant."

EPA on-site coordinator Paul Peronard said he takes a broader view of the problem initially. "The exposure we understand the most is in the workplace to men," he said. "I know everyone wants to protect children but a better method is step back and protect everyone from exposure to a disease we know so little about."

"I'm feeling like we are back to where we were two years ago," Lee said. "Step up to the plate federal government."

Clinton Maynard, another CAG member, said he is concerned that ATSDR wants to turn over the medical portion of the asbestos problem to state and local medical authorities.

"The difference from two years ago is that ATSDR is trying to leave town and I don't think their job is done," he said.

Strausbaugh said the agency is not leaving town but there are organizations and agencies better suited to creating the data base and monitoring students including, perhaps, a collaborative effort.

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