A danger that lurks below

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In Hoosick Falls, have health problems resulted from water contamination?

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Looking down on Carey Ave. the Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics plant is seen in the background on Wednesday, Nov. 25, 2015, in Hoosick Falls, N.Y. (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)

Hoosick Falls

On warm nights, a stench similar to burning rubber often wafted through open windows in the hardscrabble neighborhood surrounding the Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics plant.

Situated on the western edge of this tight-knit factory village, the plant has been a mainstay employer in the small community for decades.

Ian Webber, 38, remembers the acrid smell from the factory's smokestacks only a few doors away from the house where he grew up. But, like many others in this blue-collar community, Webber thought little of the toxic chemicals used at the plant or the other factories that once dotted the village. He and his younger brother Sean used to sled down the big sloping hill behind the Saint-Gobain plant and play in the fields next to it with other neighborhood kids.

In late 2006, Webber was living in Montana when his father called with news that Sean, then 25, was very sick. Webber moved home. His brother, a committed athlete who was a star goalkeeper and captain for the Hoosick Falls High School soccer team, was at Albany Medical Center Hospital for about a month.

Doctors were unable to figure out why his pancreas wasn't functioning properly, although they could see a mass in the organ.

"They kept telling us, 'He's too young; there's no way he has cancer,'" Webber said. "We drove him to Boston."

Less than eight months later, Sean Webber died from pancreatic cancer.

His death wasn't an anomaly.

These days, residents in this eastern Rensselaer County village are talking more and more about the rare forms of cancer and thyroid diseases they say have afflicted friends and family members through the years. Many are pointing to the village's water system, which draws its supply from underground wells several hundred yards from the Saint-Gobain plant overlooking the Hoosic River.

The suspected culprit is a man-made chemical, perfluorooctanoic acid, or "PFOA," that was used since the 1940s to manufacture industrial and household products such as non-stick coatings and heat-resistant wiring. The chemical,

discovered last year in the village's water system, has been linked to kidney and testicular cancer, as well as thyroid diseases.

"I would say within the village we certainly seem to have a high rate of cancer ... rare, more aggressive-type cancers that seem to be out of the ordinary," said Dr. Marcus E. Martinez, who treats about 5,000 patients at his family medical practice in Hoosick Falls. "When you see it every day, and you bury enough people who are your family and friends, you start to say: 'Hey, what's going on?'"

Martinez, 44, took over the busy medical office from his father, Phillip, 88, who ran the practice from 1956 to 1999.

In August 2014, the concerns Martinez and his father shared for their patients and other village residents hit home. Martinez was diagnosed with atypical carcinoid, an aggressive and rare form of cancer that afflicts only about one in 100,000 people. Following surgery and chemotherapy, Martinez said his prognosis is good, although he and many others remain suspicious of the village's water supply.

"I'm not saying it's this chemical per se, but with the factories in the area we always seem to have a lot of cancer here," Martinez said.

Dr. Marcus Martinez, right, who runs a family medical practice in Hoosick Falls, said he has seen an extraordinarily high number of cases of aggressive cancer and thyroid diseases in the village's population. Martinez was diagnosed last year with a rare form of cancer. (Michael P. Farrell/Times Union)

Many residents who are fearful of the chemical's effects are at odds with village leaders and officials with the state Health Department, who have given contradictory information about the dangers of PFOA. The village and state, while noting Saint-Gobain has made free bottled water available for residents, also have declined to warn people to stop drinking the water.

"It's a personal choice," Mayor David B. Borge said recently. "We have to follow what the Health Department says."

The mayor's position rankled the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which sent Borge a terse letter two weeks ago warning that the village's water is unsafe for human consumption. The EPA also urged the mayor to take down what the agency said is inaccurate and misleading information on the village's website about the potential health effects of PFOA. At a recent public information meeting on the water situation, and at a Village Board meeting a week later, the mayor and other village leaders declined to hand out copies of the EPA's letter.

More Information

PFOA contaminant

Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), also known as "C8," is a man-made chemical used to manufacture non-stick and other household and commercial products that are heat-resistant and repel grease and water. Under an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection agency, major manufacturers of PFOA began phasing out use of the product in 2006.

PFOA exposure to humans comes from water, air, dust, soil and consumer products. PFOA does not break down in humans and bioaccumulates over a period of years.

PFOA exposure can lead to increased health effects, including testicular and kidney cancer and thyroid disease.

Sources: C8 Science Panel; U.S. EPA; state Department of Health.

The state Health Department, which sent a toxicologist and a member of its Bureau of Water Supply Protection to the village's informational meeting, handed out "fact sheets" that included the statement: "Health effects are not expected to occur from normal use of the water."

But many residents who attended the disjointed informational meeting said they left confused about the health risks. Lloyd Wilson, who works for the Health Department, told at least one resident at the meeting that over-the-counter charcoal filters might remove the PFOA contamination, but that they work better with cold water.

"We don't really have a regulatory law, so there's no standards being exceeded," Wilson said. "We're doing what we can to facilitate this getting removed."

Judith Enck, regional director at the EPA's New York City office, said Saint-Gobain's recent pledge to supply free bottled water for village residents and install an estimated $2 million carbon filter at the water treatment plant are first steps. The project at the water plant, which provides drinking water to roughly 4,500 people, is not expected to be completed for nearly a year.

"So the good news is people have an alternate water supply and they should use it," Enck said. "The bad news is we don't know how long people have been drinking water with PFOA in it."

As the debate about the safety of the village's water unfolds, a Times Union examination of the community's health history raises questions about whether the village's water system is on a path to being declared an environmental catastrophe.

"Growing up, I would have never thought about the water, but the exhaust from the factory," Ian Webber said. "Now that I think about it, this isn't the first time I've heard concerns about the water."

Across the village, and especially in the neighborhood surrounding the plant, longtime residents say deaths like Sean Webber's are not unusual.

Kevin W. Allard, 58, a former Village Board member who runs a greenhouse/florist business, said both of his parents, who lived in the village for decades, died from cancer. His mother, Elizabeth, who lived in the village since 1962, died at 54 from pancreatic cancer. His father, Wilbert, a steamfitter and lifelong village resident, died from a rare form of thyroid cancer four years ago at 81.

"I see what my mom and dad went through," Allard said. "I had two boys who grew up on the village water. You sit back and you wonder, is anything going to happen to them, is anything going to happen to us."

Only a few states, including New Jersey, have adopted standards setting acceptable levels on the amount of PFOA in drinking water. In New York, PFOA is classified by the state Health Department as an "unspecified organic contaminant" and the enforceable drinking water level of 50,000 parts per trillion far exceeds the 400-ppt level advised by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The state does not require testing for PFOA in public water systems.

In part, that's why a government agency didn't find the chemical in the Hoosick Falls water system last year.

It was discovered by Michael Hickey, 36, an insurance underwriter who grew up in the village and still lives there. Hickey started researching the village's cancer rates in March 2014 when Isabel M. McGuire, a 48-year-old math teacher at Hoosick Falls High School, died from complications associated with melanoma. McGuire, who worked as a lifeguard at the local town pool each summer, died 14 months after the cancer death of Hickey's father, John, a Village Board member.

Hickey said his father lived a clean life, shunning alcohol and cigarettes. But at age 68, John Hickey was inexplicably diagnosed with an aggressive form of kidney cancer. He died two years later, in 2013, not long after retiring from his jobs as a popular Hoosick Falls school bus driver and a longtime factory worker at the Saint-Gobain Performance

Plastics plant.

"Everybody knows everybody here," Hickey said. "We seemed to have a lot of people passing away and there seemed to be a lot of cancer."

John Hickey, a longtime Hoosick Falls resident, died from kidney cancer in 2013. His son, Michael, discovered a chemical in the village water system last year that has prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ask for the state of New York to investigate the source of the contamination.

Hickey began researching the chemicals used at the Oak-Mitsui Technologies plant that produced copper-foil circuit boards used in cellular phones and other electronic devices. But the First Street plant, which was shuttered last year, used toxic chemicals that were already listed on federal watch lists and tested for regularly in public water systems.

Hickey turned his focus to Saint-Gobain's McCaffrey Street plant, one of two manufacturing facilities owned by the company in Hoosick Falls. Hickey worked at the McCaffrey Street plant for a time, and his father was employed for decades. It's less than 400 yards from the nearest underground well that feeds the village's water treatment plant.

He searched the Internet for information on "Teflon and cancer" and found troubling information about studies involving DuPont, which made PFOA, and serious health effects involving people in Ohio and West Virginia who worked at or lived around the plants using the chemical. Hickey wondered if the chemical was to blame for the high rate of cancer cases that he and many other residents believe their village has suffered. "I contacted one of the guys at the water plant and said I think this is a chemical we may want to do some testing on," Hickey said.

Although he was once on the Village Board, Hickey met resistance from Borge, the mayor, who publicly downplays the significance of the PFOA health threat and has declined to advise village residents not to drink the water. "I'm not a scientist. I'm not a medical professional," Borge said in a recent interview. "But what I can say is that I've been here since 1985, that's when I moved here with my family. I continue to drink the water. I wash the dishes in the water. I take a shower in the water. Is there a concern? Certainly, there's a concern. If there wasn't a concern, we wouldn't be here now."

Hickey used his own money last year to purchase testing kits from a Canadian company that's one of the few labs equipped to test for PFOA levels in water. The lab instructed Hickey that it needed samples from the chlorinated water that flows out of the treatment plant, and raw samples from the village's underground wells.

But Hickey said the water plant operators told him the mayor instructed them not to give Hickey the samples. Hickey called the mayor, who was driving to his vacation home in New Hampshire for Labor Day weekend. "He said regular citizens don't have access to the raw water, so we can't give you those samples to test," Hickey said.

Hickey was stunned, but undeterred. He collected water samples from his kitchen sink and also snuck the testing kits into a McDonald's restaurant and a Dollar Store bathroom on the outskirts of the village. When the lab returned its results, Hickey said, they showed that the water in Hickey's home had a PFOA level of 540 ppt, well above the federal guideline for safe drinking water.

Hickey brought the results to the mayor. "I told him: 'I think we got a problem.'"

But Hickey said the mayor expressed concern about the stigma the apparent water pollution may have on the village's efforts to revitalize its struggling downtown area, part of a campaign called "Hoosick Rising."

"I remember having that first conversation with the mayor," Hickey said. "He said we don't want to have a knee-jerk reaction and alarm the whole village because we've got a lot of good things going on here ... and if we do this the water (pollution) makes it all go away."

Still, under pressure from Hickey and other residents who formed a grass-roots group, Healthy Hoosick Water, the

village and Saint-Gobain both took steps to conduct their own water tests. The results mirrored what Hickey found — elevated levels of PFOA in the village water system. Saint-Gobain, which residents said has been helpful and responsive, recorded PFOA levels of 18,000 ppt in the groundwater under its McCaffrey Street plant.

But tensions remain between many residents and the Village Board, which has declined to meet with members of Healthy Hoosick Water, whose leaders include Hickey and Martinez.

"I've never seen anything quite like this," said David A. Engel, an Albany attorney for Healthy Hoosick Water who specializes in environmental law. "We certainly were aware this was a long-term public health threat and something that had to be addressed. It turns out PFOA is one of the most environmentally persistent chemicals that we humans have ever concocted. ... We kick-started this with the village saying we exist, this is our group, and we want something done. Finally, the village sort of timidly initiated discussions with the company."

A company official said Saint-Gobain phased out its use of PFOA more than 10 years ago amid growing international concerns about the chemical's health and environmental effects. In 2006, the EPA reached an agreement with DuPont and other manufacturers to stop producing or using PFOA. The agreement came less than a year after DuPont agreed to pay $10.25 million in civil penalties to settle a complaint brought by the EPA regarding the company's PFOA pollution in the Midwest. At the time, it was the largest civil administrative penalty ever obtained by the EPA under federal environmental statutes.

Saint-Gobain, based in France and one of the world's largest manufacturing companies, purchased the McCaffrey Street plant in 1999, becoming the facility's fifth owner since it opened in 1956.

Looking ahead, Engel said, the members of Healthy Hoosick Water are concerned the Village Board, led by the mayor, appear content to only have Saint-Gobain pay for a new water filter at the treatment plant. Engel said there needs to be a comprehensive examination of what caused the pollution, where it came from, how far it has spread and whether it's to blame for the deaths and illnesses that residents characterize as unusually high.

At a Village Board meeting last week, Engel stood and gave a brief outline of the history of PFOA and urged the mayor to stop telling residents it's a "personal choice" whether to drink the water. "To sit here and comfortably suggest, with all respect, mayor, that it's a personal choice is really not appropriate," Engel told the board. "This is a serious situation. Your worst enemy shouldn't drink it."

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