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Long Island Presses for Answers on Breast Cancer

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO,

To the women of Long Island, it remains a medical mystery that defies their most dogged investigations, even as it claims more and more of their friends and family.

To scientists around the country, the high rate of breast cancer that alarms women here is no mystery at all, but can be explained by a look at the women themselves: many of them Jewish, affluent, well educated, late to bear their first children, and even then, tending toward smaller families -- all factors that are known to raise a woman's risk of developing breast cancer.

The persistently high incidence of breast cancer among women in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, which has been known to scientists for years, has become a topic of national debate, with residents of high-cancer areas and experts divided over whether the environment or the profile of Long Island's women are more responsible for the frequency of the illness.

A panel of epidemiologists from Seattle to Cambridge, Mass., are studying the research that has been done to determine the causes of Long Island's high rate of breast cancer. They are expected to advise the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta on the course that future research should take.

The uproar, rising to a crescendo in an election year, has prompted the near tripling of Federal spending for research on breast cancer nationally, to \$430 million from \$157 million. It has also turned Long Island into something of a national laboratory for examining the risks and causes of breast cancer, and made disease detectives of the women who live here.

On dining-room tables and in basements across the island, women are documenting clusters of breast-cancer cases as they question victims about the presence of pesticides, chemical factories and electromagnetic fields in their areas, and disregarding conventional scientific research that largely rules out environmental causes.

Lorraine Pace, a 51-year-old mother of three from West Islip, is one of them. Ms. Pace, whose breast cancer was diagnosed in March, counts a score of friends with the disease, six of them with cases diagnosed this year. She is surveying 8,700 households in West Islip, coloring a map in yellow (for households in which someone had a malignant breast tumor), pink (for benign tumors) and blue (for no tumors). She has turned up 192 cases of malignant breast cancers among the 2,800 homes that have answered the survey -- roughly 13 times the average for a similar population, according to health department figures. Although people whose lives have been touched by cancer may have been the first to respond, Ms. Pace says she will keep canvassing until she gets at least 3,000 households to respond.

"You would normally expect one woman per thousand, and our statistics are showing three or four breast cancers per thousand," said Mary Solomon, whose Women's Outreach Network operates four mobile mammography vans throughout Long Island. "It's statistically ridiculous."

The panel of epidemiologists points out that suburbs have higher rates of breast cancer than cities. Westchester County, along with Nassau and Suffolk, account for three of the five counties where breast cancer is most prevalent in New York.

According to figures from the New York State Department of Health, there were 106.4 cases of breast cancer for each 100,000 women in Nassau County from 1983 to 1987, 18 percent higher than the statewide average of 89.5 cases. In Suffolk County, there were 97.2 cases per 100,000 women. In Westchester, 97.8.

The figures are the most recent available, another point of criticism among women on Long Island, who are convinced breast cancer has grown rapidly over the last six years. **Studies Rule Out Some Causes**

Nationally, breast cancer is diagnosed in more than 146,000 women a year -- one every three and a half minutes. The disease develops for 10 to 20 years before a woman or her doctor detects a telltale lump, a fact that has prompted some experts to conclude that environmental studies would be too expensive and unwieldy and that the money could be better spent on early detection and research on other risk factors.

In four studies over the last four years, the State Health Department ruled out water contamination, hazardous waste sites and termite poisons as causes of breast cancer, instead citing demographic factors. But the department, responding to political pressure and the persistent lobbying of Long Island women, continues to investigate environmental links.

"It may be that it's beyond the capabilities of science at this time to measure these kinds of exposure and their effects," said Nancy Lee, a Harvard epidemiologist.

Health experts tend to lay the high rate to the presence of risk factors among many Long Island women, including a family history of breast cancer, having the first child at a relatively late age, smaller families and a tendency not to breast feed. Jewish women of East European

origin are believed to run a 50 percent higher risk than other women. 'Hot Spots' on East Coast

"If you look at the profile of women, their pattern of risk based on data from the entire United States, their incidence is what you'd predict," said Nancy Mueller, an epidemiologist at Harvard University who is on the C.D.C. panel. "There does not seem to be an excess of the disease."

Experts have suggested that the affluence of women on Long Island, along with the general alarm over the disease, have meant more frequent mammograms and a greater likelihood of detecting the cancer early.

"We have hot spots all up and down the East Coast, and if you look at those spots, very often they're typical of the profile of Nassau County women," said Ms. Solomon. The highest death rates from breast cancer are in the northeastern corridor, from Washington to New Hampshire.

A recent study in the journal *Cancer Causes and Control* divided New York's counties according to population density, and concluded that the rates of all cancers, including breast cancer, in Nassau and Suffolk Counties were not higher than other areas in the state of similar density.

But such findings carry little weight with many women on Long Island, who say demographics can account for only 30 to 50 percent of the cancer cases.

And though scientists dismiss small clusters of cancer as statistically insignificant, women here cite perplexing examples of certain neighborhoods, streets or schools that seem to suffer epidemics of breast cancer. They have concluded their illnesses must be linked by some environmental wild card that scientists have failed to identify. "We've never proven or disproven it," said Barbara Balaban, director of the Breast Cancer Support Program at Adelphi University and the only nonscientist on the C.D.C. panel. "What kind of scientist would rule something out before investigating it?"

Pat Kaplan of Wantagh said she was not surprised last December to discover a tumor in her breast. She was the third woman on her block diagnosed with breast cancer, and identifies the houses on her street by the cancers of its residents: "Brain, lung, breast, breast, kidney, thymus and breast," she recited.

The prevalence of the breast cancer has galvanized women on Long Island like few other issues. Lorraine Pace, who runs the West Islip Breast Cancer Coalition, said discovering the cancer changed her life. "It's made me become an activist, and environmentalist, and active in the women's movement," she said.

"We're not trying to scare people," added Pat Nicols. "We're trying to find some common denominator that will be helpful in getting the attention of the Government to get funding and maybe even set up Long Island as some kind of national model to figure out what causes breast cancer."