Australian investigation underscores global health dangers of toxic foam exposure

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An investigation by Australia's Fairfax Media has underscored the potentially deadly consequences of exposure to toxic PFAS chemicals. It documented the existence of a cancer cluster in the US city of Oakdale, Minnesota, close to the global headquarters of chemical manufacturing giant 3M, which produces the substance.

The revelation is a damning indictment of Australian authorities. Since 2012, residents have known that areas around 18 military bases and airports nationally have been contaminated with PFAS chemicals, used in fire-fighting foam.

State and federal governments have rejected demands for financial and medical assistance, claiming there is no clear link between the substance and life-threatening diseases such as cancer.

The Fairfax Media investigation pointed to the fraudulent character of these claims. It showed that 21 children who attended Tartan Senior High, a few blocks from 3M's Oakdale plant, have suffered cancer. Five have died.

Katie Jurek, the first of the school's pupils to be diagnosed, died from osteosarcoma in 2007. In addition to four other cancer fatalities since, another 16 students at the school have suffered various forms of the disease since 2002. They were all diagnosed during their high school studies, or in the subsequent 10 years.

The most recent victim, Amara Strande, 16, had a volley-ball sized tumour on her liver. The condition was extremely rare for someone her age.

As the number of cases grew, several parents made inquiries with the Minnesota Department of Health. They were told the numbers were insufficient for a cancer cluster to be declared.

The statistics were eventually examined as part of a lawsuit launched by the state of Minnesota against 3M last year. The action was initiated in response to damage caused to natural resources, including the aquifers that provide drinking water to 125,000 people in Minnesota.

During the trial, the Minnesota Health Department sought to downplay the rates of cancer. Their own figures, however, showed that the incidence of cancer among Oakdale children between 1999 and 2014 was 56 percent greater than the state average. Children who died in the city were 171 percent more likely to have had a diagnosis of cancer than elsewhere in the US.

Mothers had a 34 percent greater chance than the national average of having a child born with low-birth weight and were less fertile than those in unaffected areas. Cases of female breast cancer among adults were 12 percent more common than elsewhere in the state. The city's rate for all adult cancers was 8 percent above the state average.

The lawsuit was settled in February for $US850 million. But 3M did not accept any liability for the contamination and denied any PFAS-related public health issue.

During the lawsuit, internal 3M documents emerged demonstrating that the company conducted a campaign to undermine scientific studies linking its products with cancer.

Professor John Giesy, a well-known academic, had stated in internal emails that his role was to keep "bad papers" about 3M and PFAS "out of the literature." He allegedly received a secret consultancy fee from the company for over a decade.

PFAS chemicals are at the centre of a growing international health crisis. They have been linked to the suppression of the immune system, reproductive problems, hormone abnormalities and various cancers. The chemicals have been widely used in various products, including non-stick cookware and items with

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water repelling surfaces.

Some of the worst contaminations are the result of 3M's "light water" C8 firefighting foam. The product has been used by emergency personnel in Australia and globally. For decades, it entered ground soil and contaminated waterways and aquifers.

In May 2000, 3M announced it would cease production of the product following research by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicating the presence of PFAS chemicals in the blood of affected populations.

In the years following, meetings between 3M and Minnesota's government regulators revealed that PFAS waste was dumped in the city's landfill and other sites around Oakdale. By 2004, the chemicals were present in Oakdale's water supply with elevated concentrations in some cases reaching 20 times what is considered the safe level.

There are clear parallels with the plight of residents of Williamtown, near Newcastle, in the Australian state of New South Wales. The town's waterways and groundwater have been contaminated with PFAS chemicals by firefighting foam runoff from the nearby air force base.

Federal and state governments have commissioned reports that attempted to whitewash the responsibility of the relevant military and civilian authorities, which have done nothing about the contamination for decades.

A federally-funded "expert health panel" report released in May said the government need not conduct disease screening or health interventions for highly exposed groups. It claimed there was "weak and inconsistent evidence" about the health impact of PFAS chemicals.

The state health department has also referenced the work of 3M's scientists to maintain there is "no consistent evidence" linking the toxic substances to cancer. The department's analysis of cancer incidences in the Williamtown area denied the existence of a cancer cluster on Cabbage Tree Road, labelling it as a coincidence.

The response echoes that of the Minnesota Health Department.

After the contamination was discovered in Williamtown, a number of other sites were identified nationally, including at Oakey, near Toowoomba, in Queensland, and Darwin and Katherine in the Northern Territory.

The Australian government is seeking to quash a growing number of class action lawsuits launched by residents of the affected communities, who have exhausted all other avenues for compensation.

In the US, the Trump administration recently directed the EPA to revise its methods of evaluating environmental and health risks associated with toxic chemicals. Touted by the *New York Times* as a "big victory for the chemical industry," this will limit the study of dangerous chemicals.

The EPA has also sought to suppress a US Department of Health and Human Services study warning that PFAS levels in public water supplies can threaten human health at concentrations 10 times lower than what the EPA deems safe.

The Fairfax Media investigation is another exposure of the role of capitalist governments, in Australia, the US and internationally, in subordinating the health and safety of ordinary people to the profit demands of corporations and big business.

The author also recommends:

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