

Close to Home: Your Unfriendly, Neighborhood Carcinogen

by Bryce T. Hensley and Martin D. Gould

Located 23 miles west of Chicago near the border of DuPage and Cook County, the leafy-green suburb of Willowbrook boasts a population of approximately 9,000 people. Surrounding the town are similarly-situated communities like Burr Ridge and Darien. The area has the all-American essentials. Lights from the Hinsdale South High School football stadium in Darien can be seen lighting up a Friday night in the fall. Baseball diamonds in the summer are filled with Little Leaguers. Playgrounds at the numerous schools in the area are filled with children throughout the day. Noticeably absent from the area, though, are the ominous harbingers of environmental contamination: large smokestacks, industrial factories, or visible clouds of pollution. Understandably, due to the lack of warning, air quality was never a concern for the residents. Prior to last summer, this quiet group of western suburbs had never given the group of buildings near the Willowbrook Village Hall a second thought. No one in the community ever suspected that the business operating out of them, their neighbor, was knowingly poisoning the air they breathed on a daily basis.

That all changed on August 21, 2018. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) (a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) released a report using data from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that shook these picturesque communities to their core. The Willowbrook census tract was found to have the 19th highest cancer risk in the country out of over 76,000 census tracts. The results were horrifying and surprising to the residents. How was this possible? What was responsible for the exorbitant risk of cancer present? Who was at risk? The report highlighted a single chemical as being the overwhelming culprit, responsible for nearly 89% of that risk: ethylene oxide (EtO). There is only one facility in the area that utilizes this chemical—Sterigenics.

Before the report was released, the vast majority of residents had no idea that Willowbrook was home to Sterigenics, a medical sterilization facility, located right off Midway Drive. Since 1984, Sterigenics and its predecessors have run their companies out of the business park located behind the Target and Denny's, right across from the Willowbrook Village Hall and the Willowbrook Police Station. Within a one-mile radius of the facility, alone, there are four schools and one daycare facility. Sterigenics uses EtO to sterilize medical equipment for medical device manufacturers, hospitals, and other companies. After the sterilization process, gas is emitted through the stacks on the roof of the facility while other gas is trapped inside.

The carcinogen does not discriminate, although it is especially harmful to children. Just one molecule of the chemical can kick-start a chain reaction of mutagenic reactions that may, one day, develop into cancer. Since the 1940s, EtO has been studied for its mutagenic effects on human health. In the late 1970s, EtO was found to increase the frequency of those mutations and was characterized as a potential carcinogen. In 1985, the potential carcinogen label was heightened to that of "reasonably anticipated to be a carcinogen." In 1987, the state of California classified it as a "known carcinogen." In 1994, the World Health Organizations International Agency for Research on Cancer listed EtO under its highest risk classification: "carcinogenic to humans." Even with these escalating classifications, Sterigenics continued to operate in the area, emitting hundreds of thousands of pounds of EtO during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, Sterigenics' predecessor, Griffith Laboratories, had received letters regarding the environmental impact, dangers, and carcinogenic qualities of ethylene oxide in the 1980s, shortly after it opened.

The August, 2018 report, however, limited its findings to recent years' emissions, which only numbered in the several thousands of pounds. Notwithstanding the drastic reduction in emissions since the company's early years, the ATSDR still placed Willowbrook in the top 20 tracts for cancer risk in the country. This was primarily due to recent studies that found a 30-fold increase in EtO's cancer potency. The news was chilling for members of the community. If the risk is this high now, where would it have been in the late 80s and early 90s when emissions were exponentially higher? Suddenly, the unexplained mystery of entire blocks of family homes having multiple residents with cancer began to make sense. Individuals with no family history of cancer finally had an explanation. The community's eyes were opened to a devastating reality: they were living in America's Chernobyl.

Research conducted over the last forty-plus years has shown that exposure to EtO can increase the prevalence of hematopoietic cancers (leukemia, lymphoma, myeloma), breast cancers, miscarriages, and fertility issues, as well as cancers of the stomach and pancreas. Research into the carcinogen's effects are ongoing and more conditions may be revealed to have a relation to EtO exposure. While most of the studies deal with short-term, high dose exposure from workers handling the carcinogen, individuals within the surrounding communities have received a constant dose of this cancer-causing toxin for one, two, or—in some cases—three plus decades. It has infiltrated homes where families live, businesses where adults work, and schools where children learn. For thirty-five years, EtO has been ubiquitous in these communities and the people most at risk had no idea.

The news of Sterigenics and its poisoning of the surrounding communities has since caught the attention of everyone, from national lawmakers such as Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth; to celebrities, such as Erin Brockovich and Jim Thome; to community members enraged at the thought that they and their loved ones' health and lives were at risk without their consent, let alone a word of warning. Perhaps most importantly though, the crisis in Willowbrook caught the attention of the Illinois state government. In February, 2019, the Illinois EPA issued a seal order on Sterigenics, prohibiting the use of ethylene oxide. Unsurprisingly, the ambient air testing being conducted in the first month following the closure showed a drastic drop off of 90% reduction in EtO detected in the air.

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Sterigenics has since brokered a deal with the State in order to reopen. Despite the deafening roars of protests from residents and politicians alike, the company has elected to defy overwhelming public sentiment and attempt to reopen its doors and expel even more EtO into a community which resents the company's very presence.

Hundreds of those residents have retained attorneys within the Chicagoland area to pursue personal injury claims against the company. So far eleven cases have been filed, all of which were removed to federal court by Sterigenics. The victims have moved to remand the cases and await a ruling from the Court. The cases and remand motion are currently pending before the Honorable Rebecca R. Pallmeyer, Chief Judge of the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

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