

Dear Sir

Recent inaccurate reporting about drinking water quality and cancer rates in St Helens is too serious to let pass.

The *Mercury* (1 July 2010) reported that St Helens GP Alison Bleaney claimed the George River Water Quality Panel “did not disagree with her comments about a rise in cancer in the area”. This is misleading at best.

The *Sunday Tasmanian* (4 July 2010) quoted Dr Bleaney as saying “there had been no epidemiological studies into cancer rates”. This statement - if accurately represented – is wrong.

Epidemiologists from the Public and Environmental Health Service first investigated cancer rates in the Break O’Day area in 2004, using data from Tasmanian Cancer Registry. Nothing of concern was found.

Recently epidemiologists again analysed data for Break O’Day and separate data for the area supplied by the St Helens reticulated mains water. There was no evidence of a cancer cluster or abnormal cancer rates or trends in the area between 1993 and 2007, the latest data available. There was no unusual incidence of rarer cancer types as perceived by Dr Bleaney in the ABC *Australian Story* program.

The pattern of cancer in the St Helens area was what could have been expected given the (rising) age and socio-economic profile of the community.

Reports on these investigations, along with other health reports – are available at www.dhhs.tas.gov.au and on the George River Water Quality Panel’s website www.georgeriverwater.org.au and I encourage readers to take a look for themselves.

The health findings of the George River Water Quality Panel were, in a nutshell: “none of the available data show any impact that supports a health risk to the community”.

Despite the lack of health impacts, I support the Panel’s key recommendation that activities within the catchment be better coordinated and managed – as I do for all catchments, on a precautionary basis. But it is also important to ensure that well-intentioned efforts are not undermined by inaccurate or inappropriate use of health data.

Yours sincerely

Dr Roscoe Taylor

Director of Public Health

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