

7 July 2010

Dear Sir

Allegations of “a failure on the part of health officials to question not just the number, but the rarity of the cancers that are manifesting themselves” (Letters, 7 July) in St Helens are too serious to let pass.

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. Specific attention was also paid to the rarer cancer types mentioned by Dr Bleaney in the ABC *Australian Story* program. There was no unusual incidence of any rare or less common cancer types.

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 into 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. I encourage readers to take a look for themselves.

The review of this and other health information by the George River Water Quality Panel found, 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