

We won't let up, say sick residents

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Bitter locals tell WARREN GAMBLE about growing up near the Ivon Watkins-Dow chemical plant and a plague of death and disease that has followed.

From the top of Paritutu Rock, 10 minutes south of downtown New Plymouth, natural beauty mixes with ugly industry.

Beneath the 154m-high coastal outcrop, the Tasman Sea crashes into black sands; a few kilometres inland, green pastures lead to the foothills of snowy Mt Taranaki.

But next door rises a tall, concrete power station chimney, a string of high-voltage pylons head east, oil and methanol storage tanks blot the coastal hills, and directly below lies the sprawl of the Dow AgroSciences chemical plant.

And in the middle of it all, just over Dow's back fence, is the working-class suburb of Paritutu.

It is a modern planner's nightmare, but in the 1960s and 1970s when the land was subdivided for homes, local authorities apparently had few concerns about people and hazardous industries living side by side.

Dow, originally Ivon Watkins Ltd and then Ivon Watkins-Dow, arrived in 1960 - before most residents - and went about its business of making, among other agriculture chemicals, the herbicide 2,4,5-T.

In 1987, it became the last factory in the world to stop making 2,4,5-T after increasing concerns about the health impacts of its dioxin byproducts, specifically a compound known as TCDD.

World health authorities have classified TCDD as a cancer-causing compound. It has been linked to skin disorders, liver damage and reproductive and behavioural problems.

Gary Hooper can recall standing as a youngster on the lawn of his parents' Rosendale Cres home, less than 1km away from the plant, inhaling a strong chemical smell.

"I can remember taking a deep breath, and saying, 'Mum, that Ivon Watkins smells good tonight.' That little tacker never envisaged what would happen further down the track."

What has happened is 19 years of illness, which has had him near death, paralysed for months and diagnosed with the nerve disease Guillain-Barre Syndrome.

He has been left with an unsteady walk, "like I'm half-drunk," and a wrecked career. His family have been affected by a variety of troubles, including advanced puberty, birth defects and anger problems.

Like all of the Paritutu residents who claim a link between their illnesses and exposure to dioxin from the 2,4,5-T manufacturing process at the Dow plant, he cannot prove it.

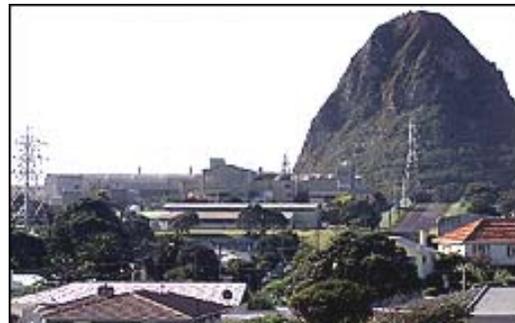
As a long-time worker in the fertiliser industry, including a spell mixing up another Dow-manufactured herbicide, 2,4-D, he accepts that could be a cause in combination with his childhood exposure in Paritutu.

"I know how crook I have been. Sometimes I wish I would die, that's how bad it was. I can't say IWD caused it because I would get sued. I know in my own heart but I can't prove it."

Hooper, now 48, has recently moved to Whangarei but made the trip back to New Plymouth this week to join a growing band of present and former Paritutu residents demanding answers.

They talk of childhoods living and playing near the Dow plant, chemical-smelling froth bubbling from the ground, dead birds and fish, strong smells carried over their houses on prevailing westerlies.

They talk of death and disease. At a public meeting in the New Plymouth District Council rooms this week, a grey-haired woman told in a voice near tears of smelly chemical substances rising from the ground at her home near the plant.



Paritutu Rock and the Dow AgroSciences plant dominate the landscape in the New Plymouth working-class suburb of Paritutu.

She said no doctor could give her an explanation for the watery blisters on her hands and feet. She had cervical cancer, and a miscarriage. Her daughter gave birth to a girl with deformities and other health problems, and was advised not to have any more children.

Others spoke of residents dying of cancer in their 50s, and out-of-the-ordinary rates of diabetes and other diseases.

The Dioxin Investigation Action Group, formed by Paritutu residents in November, says it has surveyed 183 families in the area and more than 100 had reported "serious illnesses." It says almost all had respiratory problems.

Multiple sclerosis sufferer Roy Drake carries a map with 24 red dots - and counting - of fellow sufferers he says live within 1km of the Dow plant. The 50-year-old, who moved into his Pomare Rd house in 1977 as part of a deal for workers on the nearby power station, cannot walk and is losing his sight.

From his electric scooter he has become a high-profile spokesman for the renewed residents' campaign. He relies on his own experiences, and the 11 boarders and caregivers who have become sick in his house, to back his case against Dow.

He ticks off the casualties: five friends in the area have died of brain tumours, eight have diabetes mellitus, two of his house guests committed suicide, two had strokes and others suffered asthma and emphysema.

"This thing [dioxins] creates every known disease to man," he says. "Nobody lives to 71 around here. They all seem to die in their early 60s or below."

But medical science, and Mr Drake's uncle, do not agree. Brian Williams, who has lived up the road from Mr Drake for 39 years, in the same street as the plant, is nearly 72.

The former Yorkshireman says he is neutral on the issue. He has no time for Dow or chemicals, but says he will not believe all that the campaigners claim until there is scientific backing.

"I'm an ordinary common or garden joker, and I've been in the garden with my hands in the soil since I've been here. I know 20 to 30 people in my age group who are still well and living here.

"I'm also concerned with the bad publicity New Plymouth is getting and it's getting worse. We need to get this settled once and for all."

That is something everyone in New Plymouth seems to agree on, whether they dismiss Mr Drake and the crew of archetypal battlers as stirrers, or praise them as saviours.

The health concerns have been around for more than 30 years, fuelled by a 1972 explosion when residents say a shaft of orange flame rose nearly as high as Paritutu Rock, by leaks at a company dump near the foreshore a few kilometres south in 1982 and by a chemical leak at the plant in 1986. But previous inquiries have not established any links between the manufacture of 2,4,5-T and illnesses suffered by nearby residents.

A ministerial inquiry in 1986 and follow-up studies in 1987 found measurable levels of 2,4,5-T in Ivon Watkins-Dow employees and farmers, but said they did not represent a threat to human health.

Since then, the World Health Organisation has found that dioxins, particularly TCDD, are far more toxic than previously thought, and has greatly reduced its acceptable daily exposure levels.

For its part, the company has repeatedly denied that any discharges from the plant, mainly through incineration, have posed a public health or environmental threat. Since 1998, no manufacturing has taken place there, leaving only blending and packaging operations.

The Taranaki Regional Council says discharges are within both its consent and tougher new European standards.

So will the latest move to clear up the issue, the blood tests for around 100 residents announced by Health Minister Annette King this week, provide any answers? Andrew Gibbs, the intense and articulate former nursery owner leading the residents' groups, is already sceptical.

Mr Gibbs, who suffers a stress illness that he blames on chemical sprays while farming in Northland, says the blood tests, estimated to cost \$2500 each, will show only recent exposure to dioxin.

Government officials acknowledge that the tests may not reveal what residents were exposed to 30 or 40 years ago.

The Ministry for the Environment's senior policy analyst, Simon Buckland, says blood serum tests are an internationally recognised way of showing dioxin levels. They could be measured against background levels of dioxins which everyone has, almost entirely ingested with food.

Dioxins can stay in the body in small amounts for 20 years or more. But if, as in the Paritutu case, exposure happened in the 1960s and 70s, there would be greater uncertainty in establishing those levels.

He said the testing regime and associated studies to measure the Paritutu rates of illness against the wider population could take a year to complete.

nte At his home, where he can barely lift himself into bed now, Mr Drake says: "They think it will go away, that we are fly-by-nighters, but we are not letting off."

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