The Radon Threat Is Still With Us

Bill Field, New York Times, 3-29-12

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"I am really sorry to tell you this, but you have less than a 50 percent chance of living for one year and about a 15 percent chance of living for five years."

This gloomy prognosis is delivered each year to thousands of Americans who have been given a diagnosis of lung cancer caused by exposure to the radioactive gas radon. Since the late 1980s, a half million Americans have died from radon-induced lung cancer, including a significant number who never smoked a day in their lives. You may have heard of radon more than 20 years ago when dangerous levels were first found in homes across the country. But the risks posed by this gas still have not been addressed in much of the nation.

Outside air contains very low levels of radon, but it becomes a problem when it accumulates in homes by seeping through cracks, sump-pump pits and other openings. The gas produces radioactive decay particles that can damage the cells that line the lung and lead to lung cancer. Scientifically rigorous epidemiology studies in North America and Europe have clearly established the link between radon exposure in the home and lung cancer. It is the leading environmental cause of cancer mortality in the United States and is expected to be the seventh leading cause of cancer death overall this year.

Extended exposure, even well below the Environmental Protection's Agency's "Radon Action Level" of four picocuries per liter of air, causes approximately 21,000 lung cancer deaths each year in the United States. If radon is detected at that level inside a building, the agency recommends installing a radon reduction system.

In 1986 and again in 1988, Congress directed the E.P.A. to reduce the public's exposure to radon. No substantial progress has been made. Because builders chose to continue to build homes without radon-resistant features faster than radon was being reduced in existing homes, millions of additional homes built since 1990 have been added to the tens of millions already in need of radon reduction.

Classrooms present another hazard. The E.P.A. tested for radon in a sample of schools nationwide between 1990 and 1991. The resulting study of 927 public schools concluded that over 70,000 classrooms in the United States were likely to have radon concentrations that equal or exceed the E.P.A.'s action level. But little has been done to fix the problem. More than 20 years later, only a few states have laws that require some form of radon testing in schools, even though sending a student to a classroom with high radon concentrations presents a cancer risk similar to requiring that student to smoke a few cigarettes during the school day.

As the E.P.A. candidly stated in its most recent plan to address this deadly carcinogen: "Too few homes, schools and day-care facilities are tested for radon. An even smaller number are mitigated when high radon levels are found. Although the technical knowledge exists to reduce radon risks, the United States has not yet achieved the level of voluntary action required to make a real impact on indoor radon exposure."

Who dropped the ball? That was the question asked in 2010 by Dr. Margaret Kripke, one of the members of the President's Cancer Panel, after hearing testimony on the dangers of radon exposure. The answer is primarily the E.P.A.

The risk of lung cancer is orders of magnitude higher for radon than the risk caused by other cancer-causing agents the E.P.A. regulates. The agency's own Office of Inspector General found in 2008 that the E.P.A. failed

over a 20-year period to notify Congress that it was not reaching the goals set by lawmakers to reduce indoor radon exposure and that the E.P.A. never seriously considered an alternative approach.

Now the agency has decided to throw in the towel. The E.P.A.'s proposed 2013 budget would eliminate all money to help states promote radon awareness, oversee professional testing and reduce the risks of exposure.

This is unacceptable. The E.P.A., Congress and the states need to take forceful action to reduce this leading environmental cause of cancer death in the United States.