

Doctors treating Porter Ranch residents want more gas-leak guidance

Susan Abram, Los Angeles Daily News, 1-19-16

Nearly three months after natural gas began leaking from a well near homes in Porter Ranch, physicians say they have received no formal guidelines from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health about chemicals released in the air or how to answer questions about long-term health effects.

The lack of information has created uncertainty among doctors and nurses across the San Fernando Valley, who have received a steady flow of patients complaining of headaches, nausea and nosebleeds, said Dr. Peter Richman, president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association and a general surgeon with Facey Medical Group in Mission Hills.

What's especially troubling, he said, is the lack of information on prolonged exposure to methane and to trace chemicals related to the gas leak, some of which are known carcinogens that can cause long-term health effects.

Los Angeles County health officials have cautioned that levels of chemicals tracked so far in Porter Ranch are not believed to be associated with long-term health problems. But some independent experts who study benzene, a highly carcinogenic chemical compound found in natural gas, told the Daily News last week that residents could have been exposed to elevated levels that, over time, might prove harmful. Other university experts say there is no immediate threat.

The natural gas leak was discovered at one of the 115 wells in the Aliso Canyon Storage Facility on Oct. 23 by the Southern California Gas Co.. The agency had hoped to plug it fast but has said it would take until next month to finish repairs. Meanwhile, methane continues to leak from a 40-year-old well above the Santa Susana Mountains, spewing thousands of tons of gas into the air.

More than 2,000 households had been relocated and thousands more are still in the process, according to SoCalGas. Public health officials have said the nausea, headaches, vomiting and other issues experienced by residents stem from mercaptan, an odorant that smells like rotten eggs that is mixed with natural gas. Mercaptan is added to natural gas so that leaks can be quickly detected.

"Physicians know there is an ongoing gas leak, that there are potential contaminants, but at what levels?" Richman asked. "We do not know if that could be a health concern."

Richman said he believes physicians need updates every day, to know what contaminants exist, at what levels they are being reported and what those levels mean.

"Many physicians may not know the side effects or harm of particular contaminant," he said. "Once we know that, we can start to address the potential immediate and long-term harm of that."

Dr. Bardia Anvar, the founder and medical director for Valley Urgent Care in Northridge, said he's taking matters into his own hands by conducting blood and urine tests for some patients to see if there are any elevated levels of chemicals, including benzene.

Anvar said his urgent care has seen 100 patients come through his clinic since November complaining of dizziness, headaches and other ailments.

"We were telling them, go home and rest," Anvar said. "A lot of people have gotten better once they've left the area. But our concern is for people who do not have symptoms."

He said he knows that while the gas company and health officials have said that the gas is harmless, he questions why homes are being given air purifiers.

"It's not exactly clear if it's harmless or not," Anvar said. "We're just doing some testing to see if anything comes up in the blood on a few patients who are from the epicenter. We don't know what the long-term effects are. I think people are confused. Now they're getting concerned."

Dr. Cyrus Rangan, director of the county Bureau of Toxicology & Environmental Assessment, has said repeatedly that benzene levels are within normal Southern California conditions and that officials don't expect long-term effects.

Rangan said Monday that the department is putting together a fact sheet for physicians to be released soon. The sheet would explain that there is no need for blood or urine tests.

"Blood tests and urine tests aren't going to tell you anymore than the short-term symptoms are going to tell you," Rangan said. He also said it was best for residents who are concerned to take advantage of the relocation process offered by the Gas Co.

The health department has no plans to conduct any long-term health studies. Rangan said the department has looked into similar cases among workers at a natural gas plant that was struck by lightning in Alabama, where employees there were exposed to higher levels of methane for longer periods of time have shown no long term health effects.

The health department will present a report this week on benzene readings taken by the Gas Co. to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. In addition, the department will ask the Gas Co to expand its monitoring to test for more chemicals and for a longer period of time. The current method is to test the air in a 10-minute span.

Rangan said the health department has been working with state officials on recommendations and other concerns.

"We have been conferring with the State Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment since early November, and they concur with the interpretations and perspectives that we have been articulating to the community about health risk," Rangan said.