DuPage cancer risk linked to Rauner Cancer risk linked to Rauner’s former firm

EPA: Toxic gas from company owned by governor’s former firm

BY MICHAEL HAWTHORNE  CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Two low-slung industrial buildings, tucked behind a Target store in west suburban Willowbrook, are about as nondescript as they come. For years, they have been home to Sterigenics International, a company that has quietly gone about its business of fumigating medical instruments, pharmaceutical drugs and food to kill bacteria and pests.

But a new federal study is putting a bright spotlight on the company, finding that people living nearby face some the nation’s highest cancer risks from toxic air pollution.

A gas used by the company, ethylene oxide, is far more dangerous than previously thought, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In one census tract near the plant, the EPA estimates the risk of cancer is more than nine times the national average.

Another federal agency concluded the cancer risks could be significantly higher.

Federal officials began investigating Sterigenics last year after surrounding communities popped out on a national map of health hazards from breathing toxic chemicals.

The company also stands out because since 2011 it has been owned by a private equity firm co-founded by Illinois Gov. Bruce Rauner, who left the firm a year later to begin campaigning for public office.

About 19,000 people in southeast DuPage County live within a mile of the Willowbrook facility. Four schools and a day care center also are close by, including Hinsdale South High School in Darien and Gower Middle School in Burr Ridge.

Local officials have been reeling since the EPA privately shared the Sterigenics study with them last week. The agency posted it online without notice late Friday.
“For the past several days I have been working non-stop with village trustees and administrators — reaching out to local, state and federal officials and assembling a task force to help us interpret the report,” Willowbrook Mayor Frank Trilla said Monday in a statement on the village’s website.

Ethylene oxide, a key ingredient in the manufacturing of other chemicals, also has been used for decades as fumigant to sterilize heat-sensitive medical equipment and other goods. The volatile, easily absorbed chemical has been on the federal list of carcinogens since 1985, and in December 2016 the EPA released a long-delayed reassessment linking it more conclusively to breast and blood cancer.

Shortly after that, the agency began updating its semi-regular National Air Toxics Assessment, a screening tool used to identify areas where more investigation is needed.

Based largely on the updated dangers of exposure to ethylene oxide, the EPA concluded that seven census tracts around the Sterigenics plant in Willowbrook have cancer risks high enough to trigger the agency’s concern.

The Willowbrook tracts are among 109 nationwide with cancer risk scores greater than 100, meaning if 1 million people were exposed to the same level of pollution throughout their lives (24 hours a day, for 70 years), 100 of them would likely develop cancer.

Most of the other tracts are in “Cancer Alley,” an infamous stretch of chemical plants along the Mississippi River in Louisiana.

After the EPA looked more closely at Sterigenics and measured ethylene oxide levels in nearby residential areas, a related federal health agency determined the cancer risks in southeast DuPage could be orders of magnitude higher than initially estimated: up to 6,400 per million, or more than 6 cases of cancer for every 1,000 people.

“This is just staggering,” said Peter Orris, a veteran occupational and environmental medicine researcher at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who for years has been pushing hospitals to stop using ethylene oxide. “They shouldn’t be using this chemical as a sterilizer because it can’t be controlled.”

A spokeswoman for Sterigenics’ parent company said executives are still reviewing the newly released study. The company called the use of ethylene oxide “a critical step ... to protect patients who use these products from harmful bacteria that could cause infection or death.”

At the EPA’s behest, the company installed new equipment in July intended to reduce the Willowbrook plant’s pollution. Federal officials, along with the Illinois EPA, haven’t determined yet if the controls are effective.

For now the company is working voluntarily with the agencies. The last enforcement action against the Willowbrook plant was in 2013, when the Illinois EPA discovered an ethylene oxide leak while investigating a chemical spill near the facility. Sterigenics later paid a $50,000 fine.
It appears the Willowbrook facility’s air pollution does not pose the type of immediate health threats seen in some work settings, the U.S. EPA said in a statement. The federal agency also said it is reviewing ethylene oxide emissions at other facilities across the country and is considering an overhaul of national air quality regulations to address heightened concerns about the chemical.

“EPA is working closely with Willowbrook to address any community concerns,” said Cathy Stepp, the regional EPA administrator.

The Willowbrook facility is one of nine ethylene oxide sterilizers operated nationally by Sterigenics, which has grown rapidly since it was bought out in 2011 by GTCR, the private equity firm formed by Rauner and a colleague during the late 1990s after dissolving another firm with the same name.

Rauner retired as chairman of GTCR in 2012 as he began laying the groundwork for his successful 2014 bid for governor; he has said his current investments have been delegated to a power of attorney.

Sterigenics is now owned by Sotera, a Cleveland-based venture between GTCR and Warburg Pincus, another private equity firm that acquired a majority stake in 2015.

The company’s website says its name was inspired by Soteria, the Greek goddess of safety, “and reflects the Company’s unwavering commitment to global health.”

Neither the Rauner campaign nor the governor’s office answered detailed questions from the Tribune.

The area is represented in Springfield by House Minority Leader Jim Durkin, a Darien Republican who said he is working with state and federal officials “to ascertain the facts and formulate next steps to ensure the safety of Willowbrook residents and the residents of surrounding communities.”

Reevaluating hazards posed by toxic chemicals often leads to conclusions that widely used substances are more dangerous than once thought. Yet the federal government can take years to publish risk assessments based on the latest science, largely because of industry opposition and bureaucratic inertia.

When a federal judge ordered the EPA to update its ethylene oxide regulations during the mid-2000s, the agency said it needed to wait for a new assessment of the dangers — the one finally published in 2016.

Regulations on toxic substances are even more difficult to enact. For instance, the government still hasn’t banned asbestos, a well-documented carcinogen that has killed thousands of people who suffered devastating lung diseases.

President Donald Trump’s first budget would have gutted the EPA program that produced the new ethylene oxide assessment, and the administration has moved to roll back or delay several environment, health and safety regulations. The Republican-controlled
Congress also has moved several times to eliminate funding for the chemical assessment program, though for now it continues to operate.

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