Chemical soup: the burden of proof

KERI MOLLOY

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Other countries are already restricting toxic chemicals in public places and encouraging gardeners to find alternatives but we are still exposed to a cocktail of chemicals generally, not even identified let alone monitored.

At the height of the horticultural spray era, Kerikeri was dubbed the cancer capital and while spraying has decreased, there are still fears that Kerikeri is a high cancer area. There is no way of knowing, however, as the authorities don’t collect that level of data.

The last census area unit breakdown available was obtained from The Bay Chronicle in the 1990s: Northland Health Research Project Manager Dr Stephen Twitchen supplied figures showing Kerikeri to be the 49th highest out of 431 units in the 25-44 age group.

In 1994 Kerikeri GP Rob Palmer wrote to Northland Health, saying he was interested in how cancer mortality rates relate to cancer incidence rates: “That is, whether it is possible to predict or likely that an area might have a normal or low cancer mortality rate but, in fact, have a higher than average incidence of cancer in the community.”

Dr Palmer said at the time, “The concern of course, in an area like Kerikeri, is that the heavier use of agricultural chemicals, particularly pesticides, over the past 10 to 15 years may be causing a higher than average incidence of cancer. If one made the assumption that most of the patients developing cancer in the area had lived here long enough to be affected by it, and that adverse environmental factors, then it might be several years before an excess mortality from cancer became evident.”

The current approach to Northland Health is to meet with the people who have concerns.

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Northland medical officer of health Jonathan Jaran

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“You have no right to be perverse to this community when we have a basic biochemist like Jonathan Jarman who was a biochemistry lecturer at the medical school in Auckland and is putting up student surveys to do any survey. The type of more uninteresting statistics which you – or any concerned citizen – would want are not gathered by the New Zealand government ‘This is a continuing disgrace.’

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