



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact:

Tammy Murphy, Advocacy Director, [Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania](http://PhysiciansforSocialResponsibilityPennsylvania.org), 215-749-0960, tammy@psrphila.org

Alison L. Steele, Executive Director, [SWPA Environmental Health Project](http://SWPAEnvironmentalHealthProject.org), 724-249-7501, astele@environmentalhealthproject.org

Laura Dagley, Assistant Advocacy Director, [Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania](http://PhysiciansforSocialResponsibilityPennsylvania.org), 540-556-0132, laura@psrphila.org

Ned Ketyer, Board Member, [Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania](http://PhysiciansforSocialResponsibilityPennsylvania.org), 724-255-7440, ned@psrpa.org

Heaven Lee Sensky, Community Organizer, [Center for Coalfield Justice](http://CenterforCoalfieldJustice.org), 724-229-3550 Ext. 103, heaven@coalfieldjustice.org

Health Advocacy Groups Ask PA Department of Health for Clarification on Addressing Radioactive Waste Streams from Shale Gas Development, Providing Ongoing Physician and Community Education

March 5, 2021 — On Tuesday, March 2, public health advocacy groups **Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania** (PSR PA) and the **SWPA Environmental Health Project** (EHP) met for a third time with the **Pennsylvania Department of Health** (DOH), on this occasion to discuss radioactive waste streams and community education with respect to [two health studies](#) the DOH commissioned last year.

The studies are being designed to examine the health effects of shale gas development. One study is designed to determine whether there is a correlation between the shale gas industry and the risk of [rare childhood cancers in southwestern Pennsylvania](#), while the other will study potential [health impacts](#) from the shale gas industry. The DOH [recently announced](#) that the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health will undertake the studies, which could take up to three years to complete. Unless the university makes changes, these retrospective studies will examine a cohort of residents, with and without a record of illness, who self-identify their proximity to shale gas development sites to examine the historic correlation between illness and proximity.

In the meeting, the public health advocates questioned the DOH on whether radioactive waste streams would be examined as one pathway to exposure affecting residents. The DOH had previously said that it needed to assess whether it can make amendments to the original purchase order with the academic partner. Now, the DOH says that amendments do not need to be made because the current language does not exclude looking at radioactive waste streams. The DOH said the decision of whether to include a study of radioactive waste streams now falls to the University of Pittsburgh.

“The mission of the DOH includes the *prevention* of injury and disease; it remains that designing a retrospective academic study that ignores radioactive waste streams falls short of that mission and will not help residents and workers know whether or not it is currently safe to live and work in their respective environments,” said **Tammy Murphy**, Advocacy Director of PSR PA, who attended the meeting.

Dr. Ned Ketyer, a pediatrician, board member of PSR PA, and consultant to EHP also attended the meeting. “Over the last decade there has been a spike of rare childhood cancers, including Ewing sarcoma, in heavily fracked counties in southwestern Pennsylvania,” said Dr. Ketyer. “Parents and doctors are waiting on the DOH to confirm that pollution and radioactive waste from fracking operations aren’t to blame for this devastating outbreak. DOH must investigate fracking’s radioactive waste problem in order to provide reassurance to parents and health providers that children are not at risk.”

The public health advocates also questioned the DOH on any specific guidance the DOH might provide to physicians regarding messaging while treating members of affected communities. The DOH had previously said that the purchase order for the studies included some requirements around doing public information, communication, and annual status updates to the communities while the studies were ongoing. Today, the DOH said that they had to wait for results of the study before they could give any recommendations to healthcare providers or the community. The DOH stated they did not want to cause unnecessary alarm in the community before they had more information on health impacts.

“People are sick and children have died; the alarms have already been set off!” said **Laura Dagley**, Medical Advocacy Coordinator for PSR PA and a registered nurse. “The DOH continues to not acknowledge the body of research already out there, even though one of their studies is designed after a previous study showing negative health impacts from fracking.”

“Residents have been told for a decade that these operations pose no threat to their families,” said **Heaven Sensky**, Community Organizer for Center for Coalfield Justice. “Now they’re expected to self-report symptoms based on proximity to oil and gas development that they don’t necessarily know exists. It is imperative that the community be informed of nearby operations by researchers.”

The Center for Coalfield Justice, Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania, and the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project are committed to continuing to engage with the DOH in hopes that the agency will hear the concerns of the community.

“With new leadership at the DOH, we believe there’s an opportunity for our organizations to better educate these important policy makers on the health harms of oil and gas development,” said EHP Executive Director **Alison L. Steele**. “We urge the DOH to take more of a health-protective approach to communities in Pennsylvania, putting in place proactive measures to warn people of health harms and letting families know how they can better interrupt the pathways to exposure that put them at such great risk.”

###