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Families may sue over cancer link to pylons

Tom Robbins and Jonathan Leake

WHEN the Smith family moved into a 200-year-old house in the North Yorkshire countryside, they thought little of the electricity pylon towering above.

Thirty years later Jannette Smith believes that the power lines above Kirby Sigston, near Northallerton, are responsible for a blight on her family.

Her brother Matthew died of liver cancer in 1988 when he was 18. Her mother died of cancer in 1996. Her father is also suffering from it. Even the family's cat and dog, along with a neighbour's pet, were diagnosed with the disease. There was no previous family history of it.

"When my brother died we assumed it was a natural disease," said Jannette, 37. "Then we saw a report in a magazine about the health risks of pylons. Now it would take an awful lot to convince me that the illnesses weren't due to the power lines."

The family was not alone in its suffering. Last year the secretary of the local branch of the National Farmers' Union began to worry that cancer was becoming increasingly common in the area. He found nine cases of the disease in 19 houses along a five-mile stretch of power lines in the Northallerton area.

The report this week by the government's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation (Agnir) will be welcomed by other families across Britain who have suffered illnesses which they believe have been caused by electromagnetic fields from power lines.

For the first time the government body will accept that children living near power lines are at a small but increased risk from leukaemia.

The link between electromagnetic fields and cancer has been bitterly contested as scientific studies offered contradictory conclusions.

In 1979 Nancy Wertheimer published findings based on studies around Denver, Colorado, which showed high levels of leukaemia in children living close to overhead power lines.

In 1990 a study by Stephen Perry, a retired Midlands GP, linked electromagnetic fields to increased rates of suicide and depression. A report by Agnir in 1992 maintained there was "no firm evidence of the existence of carcinogenic hazard". Despite this, clusters of cancer sufferers living near power lines began to be identified around the country. In Abergavenny, Gwent, four neighbours developed brain tumours within 18 months. All lived near 132,000-volt cables which they suspected of being the cause.

In the eight houses closest to overhead cables on the Shortlees estate on the outskirts of Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, nine people have died of cancer in the past 15 years.

Denis Henshaw, professor of human radiation effects at Bristol University, argued that power lines produce "corona ions", molecules in the air with an electric charge. These attach themselves to airborne pollutants such as car exhaust fumes and give them an electrical charge. This means there is a greater chance of being absorbed by the body when inhaled, he believes.

Sceptical scientists dismissed the clusters as not statistically significant. But several families launched legal challenges to prove the link and to claim damages from the electricity companies.

Among them were the Studholme family who bought a house in Bury, Greater Manchester, in 1989, where an electricity meter emitted strong electromagnetic fields. Within 18 months their son Simon had developed acute

lymphatic leukaemia. He died in 1992 aged 13. The family and two others were granted legal aid to sue, but suffered a setback when reports from the American National Cancer Institute ruled out the link.

Now the families and others like them may have new grounds to press for compensation. The consequences of a successful test case would be enormous. The power lines which run over or near 25,000 homes would have to be moved; they could be buried, which would significantly diminish the electromagnetic fields.

"In our house, magnetic field levels are tenfold the recommended safe limit," said Maureen Asbury, who has led a campaign to force the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to hold an inquiry into power lines in Trentham, Staffordshire. "We are not prepared to sit back and let more people fall ill."

However, the DTI turned down the request last year.