

9/11, 10 years later: Rolls of the sick are still growing - and many won't get any better

By Beverly Weintraub Daily News
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Ken Goldfield for News

38-year-old Margrily Garcia has suffered from sarcoidosis, asthma and chronic sinusitis. Ten years after 9/11, medical experts still don't know if exposure to toxic air at Ground Zero - responsible for countless ailments - causes cancer.

"The biggest uncertainty is whether there are other World Trade Center conditions that we haven't recognized yet," said Dr. Jim Melius, head of the advisory board of the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program. "The most likely one is going to be cancer."

Melius said construction workers, police officers and firefighters see people they worked with at Ground Zero developing cancer and fear they will, too. "People are just not sure - is this going to happen to me?" he said.

Although the scientific evidence is not conclusive, the anecdotal evidence is chilling. Hundreds of deaths among 9/11 rescue and recovery workers - from lymphoma, multiple myeloma, leukemia, cancers of the esophagus, stomach, lung, larynx, liver, colon, pancreas and brain - have been reported.

Doctors at Mount Sinai Medical Center published a study in the August 2009 *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* that found an "unusual number" of multiple myeloma, or bone marrow cancer, cases in WTC responders under age 45.

The numbers - four cases out of 28,000 responders - were too small to prove an increased cancer rate, though doctors would expect to see just one case in a population that size.

Still, the study noted the "latency period ... in these cases is significantly shorter" than the usual 10 to 20 years.

More research, including a cancer study of city firefighters, is due out in September, when the British medical journal *Lancet* will devote an entire issue to Trade Center health issues.

And Dr. John Howard, head of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the fed's World Trade Center Program Coordinator, is weighing whether to add cancer to the list of health conditions covered under the program.

Still, even without counting cancer cases, the rolls of the WTC sick continue to swell. Every month, new patients sign up for monitoring and treatment.

"New patients are still coming in, people who say they went to the doctor and have been ignoring symptoms for a long time," said Dr. Laura Crowley, assistant professor of preventive medicine at Mount Sinai Medical School.

"It's important to figure out if it's related to World Trade Center exposure and will develop into something in the future."

Statistics from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show 60,270 responders and community members were enrolled in World Trade Center health programs in March, up 1,655 from December.

These include more than 15,700 from the Fire Department, nearly 35,000 other responders in New York and New Jersey, 4,500 rescue and recovery workers across the country and more than 5,300 downtown residents, office workers and students.

More than 18,400 of them needed treatment in the previous year for a Trade Center-related illness - 937 more than needed help in the calendar year that ended three months earlier in December.

That's because many of the tens of thousands who breathed in the toxic dust are still - 10 years later - not getting any better.

"There are an awful lot of people who continue to be ill from the World Trade Center," Melius said. "So there are people who continue to require a lot of medical treatment for what have become chronic medical conditions."

Crowley said those include persistent cough, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, bronchitis, headaches, nosebleeds, acid reflux, gastrointestinal illnesses, sarcoidosis, interstitial lung disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, sinusitis, sleep apnea and a loss of lung function or sense of smell.

Some get better with medication, many don't.

Even among city firefighters - who have access to top medical care and whose health is carefully tracked - the illnesses just won't go away.

Dr. David Prezant, the FDNY's chief medical officer, said up to half the 15,700 active and retired FDNY and Emergency Medical Service personnel enrolled in the program still had symptoms of respiratory disease last year.

About 70% suffered from depression and/or posttraumatic stress syndrome, he said. FDNY doctors have seen seven cases of pulmonary fibrosis, 300% to 400% the expected rate. Two of those responders have required lung transplants; the others still may. Before 9/11, Prezant said, there were no cases in the department.

He said there are also 40 cases of sarcoidosis, an inflammatory lung disease caused by inhaling Trade Center dust.

That's the illness that claimed the life of Jerry Borg, a downtown office worker whose death brought the official victim total last month to 2,753.

"That's what the legacy of this is - people who are sick and continue to need treatment for conditions that are disabling and continue to interfere with their daily living," Melius said. "The large numbers of people who are so sick, that's what's most worrisome about this."

Margrily Garcia, 38, Bronx

THEN: Paralegal at a law firm near Ground Zero

HEALTH PROBLEMS: Sarcoidosis, asthma, chronic sinusitis

Margrily Garcia and her colleagues weren't allowed to evacuate their law office on Broad St. until three hours after the second tower crumbled.

By then, an ominous black cloud hovered overhead and her building had run out of masks.

"We were asked to take paper towels, wet them and cover our faces," said Garcia, who worked at McMahon, Martine & Gallagher. "That was all we had."

Garcia trudged across the Brooklyn Bridge "covered in soot from head to toe."

A week later, her office reopened, but there were signs the neighborhood was poisoned. She stepped out of the Bowling Green subway station and was met with the foulest of smells - "a mixture of death and everything else that happened that day."

Some co-workers started wearing masks to work; she did not.

"Being healthy, I didn't think I was in jeopardy," she said. "The authorities said you would be fine."

Garcia's health problems started with a minor cough that erupted into a whooping, incessant, chest-on-fire hack.

"It was the kind that when you hear it, you think someone is coughing up a lung," Garcia said. "My head felt like it was exploding with each cough."

She was first diagnosed with bronchitis. After she had trouble breathing, a doctor told a stunned Garcia she had asthma.

She was given a host of medications - but the cough and breathing problems remained. "I was afraid I was going to die," said Garcia, who lives in the Bronx.

After several more ER visits, Garcia landed at the WTC Environmental Health Center at Bellevue Hospital, where doctors told her she had sarcoidosis, a lung-scarring disease.

She got a pacemaker-defibrillator in her chest in 2007, and underwent sinus surgery last year.

"I'm going to be sick for the rest of my life," Garcia said.

Exactly a month after the towers fell, nearby Stuyvesant High School held a fire drill that sent Lila Nordstrom and her classmates into Rockefeller Park.

She was stunned to see dozens of National Guard troops milling around in gas masks. "It was sort of the moment that made clear that we had no business here," said Nordstrom, then an 18-year-old senior. "It was clear it was dangerous."

Nordstrom and her classmates had returned to school just two days earlier while the WTC fires were still burning.

The smell of acrid smoke hung heavy around the school. Trucks carting debris out of the site rumbled by several times a day. And the blanket of dust that settled over the neighborhood appeared to have seeped into the school.

Nordstrom, who suffered from asthma as a child but had gotten it under control, developed severe breathing problems.



(Carlos Delgado for News)

Lila Nordstrom, 27, Los Angeles (above)

THEN: Senior at Stuyvesant High School

HEALTH PROBLEMS: Severe asthma, acid reflux

She visited her doctor, who delivered a dire warning: "There's no way you should be down there."

In the next few months, Nordstrom's asthma returned with a vengeance. She went on several medications and had to quit the cross-country team.

Her asthma symptoms subsided after she left for Vassar College, but six months ago, she started to suffer from acid reflux, aggravating the asthma.

Doctors at the WTC Environmental Health Center at Bellevue Hospital gave her medicine for acid reflux, and she is feeling better.

Still, Nordstrom, who moved to California after college, resents the authorities who claimed it was safe to return to Stuyvesant.

"I had started being able to do a lot of the things that I couldn't do when I was younger, and then after 9/11, it set me back several years," Nordstrom said.

Charles Kaczorowski logged 2,274 hours working the graveyard shift at Ground Zero, where he supervised cleanup and recovery efforts at the Pile.

The Vietnam vet was posted at the site a week after 9/11. He remained there for 10 months.



(James Keivom/News)

Charles Kaczorowski, 63, Long Island (above)

THEN: Project manager for the Department of Design and Construction

HEALTH PROBLEMS: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, reactive airways dysfunction syndrome, upper and lower gastrointestinal problems

"It was my home away from home," Kaczorowski said.

Watching countless bodies being pulled from the rubble was wrenching, but Kaczorowski never thought the site's noxious smell might lead to health problems. While on vacation in Florida in April 2002, he started coughing.

"The good clean air in Florida was killing me," he said.

That was just the beginning. After his stint at Ground Zero, Kaczorowski enrolled in the World Trade Center Medical Monitoring and Treatment Program.

Over the years, he was diagnosed with a series of debilitating illnesses. His breathing is still labored, and he regularly suffers severe coughing fits. Still, he has no regrets.

"I'm glad I was there to do what I could for the city," Kaczorowski said. "If it ever happened again, I'd be there."

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