

'Cluster' of birth defects is reported near San Jose semiconductor plant

By Susan Yoachum
Staff Writer

State and county health officials Monday began investigating "an apparent cluster" of birth defects in a South San Jose neighborhood.

Parents said they fear the problem may be linked to chemicals used in the nearby Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corp. In the past few months, chemicals stored at the semiconductor-manufacturing plant seeped into the neighborhood's water supply.

"We are taking it quite seriously, and we will respond," said Dr.

Richard Jackson, medical epidemiologist for the state Department of Health Services.

Santa Clara County Public Health Director Bernice Giansiracusa said she "immediately agreed" that the complaint from a Los Paseos neighborhood resident "merits looking into," and added that she has "given this information to (the health department) statistician to see what information we have about birth defects."

Parents in the neighborhood noted with alarm that in just over three years, there have been at least eight cases of miscarriages,

birth defects or stillbirths.

There has been no similar cluster of birth abnormalities reported to the county since the late 1960s, Giansiracusa said.

"You will throw five sixes in a row if you throw often enough," Jackson said. "The question here is whether it is statistical randomness or a real event."

Fairchild communications director John Salazar said the company also is "taking it very seriously."

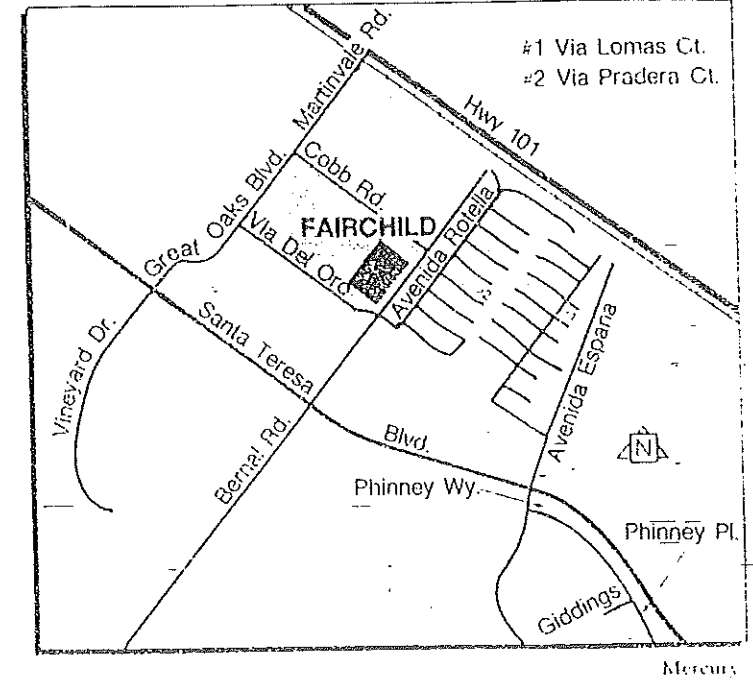
"We are very strongly hopeful that there is no cause-and-effect relationship," Salazar said. "Based on all the medical information we

have at our disposal, we feel there is no evidence to support the claim."

State and county health officials learned of the birth defect problem Friday from the president of the water company that serves the area. Betty Roeder, Great Oaks Water Co. president, said she notified health officials after she received a letter from neighborhood resident Lorraine Ross.

In a letter she delivered to the water company Thursday, Ross listed the names of eight women in

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Area where birth defects were reported

'Cluster' of defects reported

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the neighborhood — including herself — who have had miscarriages, stillbirths or children born with congenital defects since October 1978.

In that period, there were two miscarriages, one stillbirth and five cases of birth defects. The adopted child of a ninth woman in the neighborhood has contracted two severe blood diseases since 1980.

"These are people I know personally," Ross said in her letter. "I haven't made a formal survey, but I feel someone or some agency of accountability should. My neighbors and I are greatly concerned that there could exist a link between these tragedies and the presence of harmful chemicals at Fairchild."

Leak reported

Those concerns came to a peak after Ross read newspaper accounts about a chemical leaking from Fairchild's underground solvent tank into her neighborhood's water supply. It was then that she wrote the water company.

Fairchild officials have acknowledged that the company is responsible for the leak of 1,1,1 trichloroethane — a solvent used to clean silicon chips — into one of the Great Oaks Water Co.'s 12 wells. However, officials for both the state Department of Health Services and the Regional Water Quality Control Board said when that leak first was discovered, they did not consider the contamination to be a "major threat to public health."

In her letter, Ross referred to that phrase, saying "this may or may not seem to be a major threat to public health — but it is of major importance to us who are so directly affected. We are fearful that 20 years into our future, we may be experiencing repercussions from this."

Report due in week

Giansiracusa said she expects to have the county statistician's report in about a week. At that time she will meet with Jackson and "other experts" to decide what steps should be taken next.

While the county health department reviews birth statistics, the state will be looking at studies on the health effects of chemicals used at Fairchild.

Jackson said he was unaware of any link between 1,1,1 trichloroethane — the chemical that leaked into the well — and birth defects, but he said the literature search was being made to satisfy that question. He said the state also will look for studies linking birth defects to other chemicals used at the Fairchild plant, located at 101 Bernal Road. Those include xylene, isopropanol and acetone, all of which are used at plants during the semiconductor manufacturing process.



Len Lahman — Mercury

Parents concerned about birth disorders in neighborhood gathered Tuesday at home of Lorraine Ross, center

Birth disorders near plant now total 19