

The Plight of My Childhood Community Simon B. Zeichner, DO

There were acres and acres of cornfields behind my home in upstate New York. Every morning in the warm months I would awake to hear a small plane diving down into the fields. Over and over the plane would dip over the homes and gardens of our town, leaving a fine white powder trail behind. Often we would see the powder lying on the barbecue grills and picnic tables. My mother would tell us to roll up our windows and hold our breath as we drove down the road, hearing the plane swoop overhead. We all had wells and grew vegetables. We rode our bikes up and down the cornrows. Occasionally, we heard of pets dying, but never saw a reason to be concerned. A few years later, five area children were diagnosed with brain tumors and four with leukemia. One of those children was my best friend.

The excerpt above was taken from one of my college admissions essays that I wrote when I was a senior in high school. The essay is a true account of my own experiences growing up in a farming community affected by a cancer cluster. The experience deeply disturbed me, and I felt strongly, as others did, that the horrible chain of events was more than just a coincidence. I was convinced that a chemical agent or pesticide was the culprit and took it upon myself to investigate and learn more about the potential hazard impacting our community. I learned that the problem was much more complicated than I had initially suspected. I began attending town meetings and writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Despite my best efforts and the relentless commitment of activists in the community, the problem was never resolved. A few people lost their lives, and the questions surrounding the cancer cluster remained unsolved.

I left for college and osteopathic medical school, and the memories of my hometown began to diminish. Then, during my third and fourth years of osteopathic medical school, I began hearing reports of a possible cancer cluster near my newly adopted community in southern Florida. I found eerie similarities between this community and that of my childhood. Families were confronted with extremely rare pediatric neurologic tumors. The people felt victimized and helpless. Speculation regarding chemical leaks and

hazardous landfill materials left the community pointing fingers at the local engine manufacturing plant. The community was able to mobilize and convince the US Environmental Protection Agency to test the local water and soil for contaminants. Ten soil and 6 water sample tests later, no specific chemical agent could be identified. The southern Florida community was left wounded from cancer and a lingering fear of danger lurking in their backyards.

The day the final soil sample results were reported marked the day I committed myself to pursue a career in hematology and oncology. I initially thought this field would be too depressing and would not allow me to have a great impact on patients' health. In the past few years, however, as everything in this field of medicine has changed, so has my outlook.

The Human Genome Project has allowed for the identification and targeting of genes affected in particular cancers. As a result, there has been a rapid development of novel treatments for many types of hematologic and oncologic conditions. In fact, it is difficult to read through a medical journal without finding a breakthrough in the field. Although the survival rates for some cancers remain dismal, many cancers have seen substantial improvements in prognoses. Therapies are finally being tailored to individual patients. We are only beginning to scratch the surface with new breakthroughs.

I am excited about the treatment options that these breakthroughs may bring, and I look forward to the opportunity to help severely afflicted patients improve their chances for survival. The plight of my childhood community will not be forgotten. Instead, it will drive me toward a successful career in hematology and oncology.

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