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**ALARM OVER BIRTH DEFECT
'ANOMALIES'****Pesticide link to medical problems – claim****Chris Benfield****CAMPAIGNERS demanded an inquiry last night after independent research suggested the number of babies born with defects in parts of Yorkshire is more than four times the national average.**

In the survey, affluent parts of Sheffield, along with areas in the Humber region, Scarborough, Whitby and Ryedale, all had high numbers of babies born with medical problems including "hole in the heart", spina bifida and cleft palate.

The most startling figure in the results is the one for Mid Devon – 62 defects per thousand babies, or one in 16, against a national average of just 11 per thousand. Most of rural Wales was also well above the average.

According to the figures, Sheffield had 40 defects per thousand babies overall. The rate was 49 per thousand in the mainly middle-class area covered by the Sheffield South West Primary Care Trust.

The research suggests North East Lincolnshire, taking in Grimsby and a line of heavy industry on the south bank of the Humber, had 37 per thousand – 10 times the rate for Wakefield, for example. And although the variations are based on small figures, the pattern has been there for some years.

The survey, using figures from April 2002, highlights big variations from the national average in some industrial areas.

But it also found more surprising blips.

The area represented by the NHS Trust for Scarborough, Whitby and Ryedale had the equivalent of 19 babies with recordable defects in every thousand born alive, compared with only nine in East Leeds, where poverty and smoking are bigger factors.

According to researchers, who extracted the figures from Government records, possible factors in Sheffield include the waste incinerator in the city centre; a tip for incinerator ash at Parkwood to the north; cement works to the south-west; open-cast mining to the south-east; wind-borne exhaust particles from the elevated section of M1 over the Tinsley viaduct to the north-east; and redevelopment of polluted industrial sites.

In rural areas, they say, agricultural pesticides are probably part of the problem

In the year under investigation, the burning of livestock during the foot and mouth epidemic could have had an impact.

But the microscopic pollutants they are particularly concerned about will drift a long way on the wind so, for example, oil refining on the Bristol Channel could have affected a lot of Wales.

The rate of birth defects has been rising for 10 years, despite more abortions.

The figures were put together by Michael Ryan, 56, a civil engineer who lost two of his four children – a baby girl who died after convulsions and a teenage son who died from leukaemia – and came to believe they were victims of pollution from a hospital incinerator in Shrewsbury, near his home.

He works with an ex-GP, Dick van Steenis, who has become an authority on links between pollution and illness since he established that Welsh schools downwind of an oil refinery suffered an asthma increase.

Senior Liberal Democrat Lembit Opik, the party's Shadow Secretary for Wales, told the Yorkshire Post: "My view is that these figures are not random. When the House of Commons is sitting again, I will be asking some formal questions."

Malcolm Hooper, a professor at Sunderland University, said: "These figures should be in the public domain so people can put pressure on regulatory bodies."

Prof Hooper is a specialist in the effects of chemicals on health and a leading figure in the campaign to prove that veterans of the 1991 Gulf War were poisoned.

He said: "Dick van Steenis is doing important work, which has been ignored for too long."

The Government has collected reports of a range of birth defects since 1964, after anti-sickness pill thalidomide caused an epidemic of deformities.

But for some time now, the birth defects report published by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) has been taking in less detail from fewer health authorities.

Mr Ryan and Dr van Steenis say it should be possible to focus in on wards within the health trust areas, if the ONS will release the details and if they can get professional help to do the analysis.

The ONS said Mr Ryan has made some assumptions which mean his statistics are not



completely reliable. But its arguments suggest he has under-estimated the variations, if anything.

Chris Bentley, director of public health for South Yorkshire, said: "We are aware of variations, even within our patch, but the numbers are so small that making connections is quite difficult." Jillian Creasy, a Sheffield Green Party councillor and a GP, said: "I endorse Mr Ryan's call for more detailed, very local statistics. We know from experience that it is the people who live and work in these areas who are most likely to come up with the clues which link particular pollutants to the affected population."

Robert Goodwill, farmer and Conservative MP for Scarborough and Whitby, said: "If the pesticides theory held up, you would expect to see it reflected in intensive arable areas like Lincolnshire and Norfolk."

"One important factor in birth defects is the age of the mothers, and that tends to be higher in wealthier areas."

"In short, it would be wrong to jump to conclusions. But the variations are surprising and I am in favour of anything that can be done to find out more."

For more details visit www.ukhr.org

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