Infant mortality spike overlooked during the Corby steelworks "clean-up"

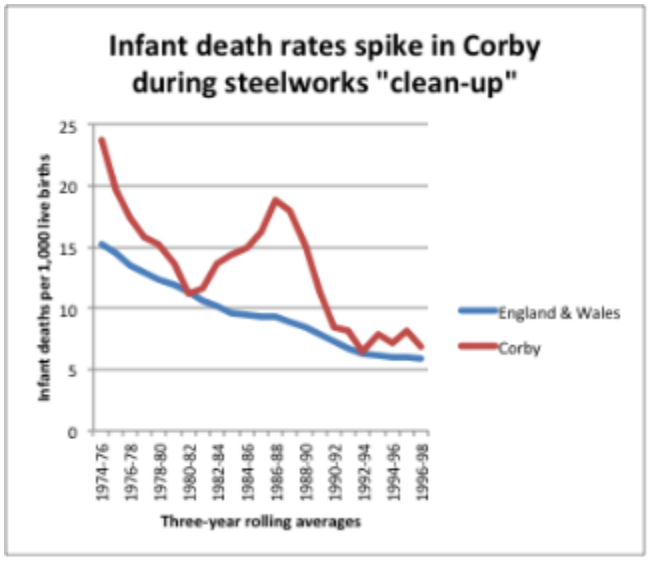
by Michael Ryan BSc, C Eng, MICE

The collection of birth defect data from January 1964 (following the Thalidomide scandal) should have allowed swift identification of sources of environmental pollution that could be linked to babies born with defects.

This hasn't occurred as the long legal fight by Solicitor Des Collins showed over the clustering of birth defects during the Corby steelworks clean-up.

The following sixty-one-year-old article shows that causal factors of birth defects were hoped to be identified and also that birth defects were known to be "a problem which involves a high infant mortality rate and is responsible for much ill health, disability, and parental distress":

"SCHEME TO NOTIFY MALFORMATIONS
General practitioners have received from the chief medical officer of the Ministry of Health a letter informing them of a scheme, which came into force on January 1, for the notification of congenital abnormalities. The Scheme is voluntary, but the chief medical officer expresses the hope that it will be supported by all doctors as a means of providing early information of causal factors of congenital malformation. He reminds practitioners that "following the thalidomide tragedy it was generally felt that there should be a national notification of congenital abnormalities so that any increase in these conditions might be noted as early as possible". The scheme will be widely welcomed as a valuable means of helping to cope with a problem which involves a high infant mortality rate and is responsible for much ill health, disability, and parental distress." (The Times, 6 January 1964)



The above spike in Corby's infant mortality rate correlates with the steelworks clean-up and should have been known to those Public Health officials defending Des Collins' action for justice.

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Negligence ruling
A group of children with birth defects that their families say were caused by industrial waste won a landmark judgment last week. Their mothers believe they were exposed while pregnant to a "toxic soup" released into the atmosphere when their local council cleared a disused steelworks, left, in Northamptonshire. The judge ruled that Corby borough council had failed to clear poisonous waste properly and found it guilty of negligence, public nuisance and a breach of statutory duty. The site in Corby had four blast furnaces and two coke oven complexes, which closed in 1980; between 1985 and 1989 lorries took lead and zinc waste away. Residents say waste often fell off the trucks, and the judge criticised the council's "dig and dump" approach.

Cluster revealed
The case came to light when The Sunday Times revealed in 1999 that four children in Corby had been born with limb deformities in the same area at around the same time. Doctors then found the incidence of birth defects was 10 times higher than it should have been. A report by local authority auditors found that quarry land contained high levels of arsenic, zinc, boron and nickel, even after a council clear-up. However, the families have had a long battle to make their case. "This is the first time a civil court in this country - and possibly anywhere - has connected birth defects and the negligent release of toxic waste in the atmosphere and put the two together," said Des Collins, who represented the 16 claimants."
(From "Briefing: birth defects", by Helen Brooks, The Sunday Times, 2 August 2009)

"DOCTORS have called for an investigation into a cluster of rare birth defects among children living close to one of Britain's most notorious toxic waste dumps.

The call was made last week after The Sunday Times uncovered four instances of limb deformities close to the dump in Corby, Northamptonshire.

Three of the children, born within nine months of each other in 1996, had no fingers on one hand. A fourth boy was born with the fingers of one hand joined together.

All face years of surgery. Specialists said that the incidence was more than 10 times higher than they would expect in a town of 60,000.

All the children live close to a network of toxic landfill waste sites formerly associated with a British Steel works. One - a 300-acre quarry that supplied iron stone to the works, which closed in the 1980s - had been used as an illegal fly-tip for chemical waste.

An internal report by local authority auditors reveals that the quarry land, even after a clear-up effort, contains levels of arsenic, zinc, boron and nickel in excess of environment department guidelines. "The measured levels of arsenic may well prove toxic," it says. continues

("Birth defects cluster found near toxic dump", by Stephen Bevan and Graham Hind, Sunday Times, 11 April 1999)

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