

Arsenic level lower than most, study finds

Tests on residents
of Falconbridge
find their
arsenic levels are
lower than the
Canadian average

BY CAROL MULLIGAN
The Sudbury Star

Falconbridge residents' average urinary arsenic levels are surprisingly similar to those of people in Hanmer, despite the fact Falconbridge soils contain significantly higher arsenic levels than their neighbour's.

That's one of the key findings in the arsenic exposure study funded by Falconbridge Ltd. in response to town of Falconbridge residents' concerns about the arsenic found in soils there during sampling for the Sudbury Soils Study.

The arsenic study also showed that both towns' levels were in the lower half of the average range of arsenic exposure levels among Canadians.

The study was designed to answer two specific questions:

■ Do Falconbridge residents have higher urinary arsenic levels than residents in a comparison area with lower levels of arsenic in their soil?

■ Are there higher health risks relative to other communities associated with urinary arsenic levels of Falconbridge residents?

Study director Celine Pinset said the answer to both questions was no.

Residents received results of their individual urine tests in December. Community results were presented Thursday night at a public meeting at the Falconbridge Commu-

nity Centre.

The Sudbury Soils Study is a five-year, \$5.5-million study looking at the levels of several toxic chemicals in Sudbury soils and assessing their risk to human and environmental health.

Falconbridge agreed to fund the arsenic study, which company spokesman Marc Butler said cost several hundred thousand dollars, to allay residents' fears after the Sudbury and District Health Unit alerted them to higher-than-average soil arsenic levels.

Two years ago health unit officials went door-to-door notifying residents about arsenic levels and advising them how to minimize exposure.

Some formed the Falconbridge Citizens' Committee to address fears.

Besides health concerns, residents feared arsenic levels would lower property values in the town of about 1,400. And, indeed, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. stopped insuring mortgages in the community soon afterward.

Chris Wren, head of the Sudbury Area Risk Assessment (SARA) Group that is spearheading the Sudbury Soils Study, said he will send a copy of the arsenic study to the CMHC. Wren was among those who were surprised that urine tests conducted on almost 700 people in Falconbridge and the comparison community of Hanmer showed little difference.

The average exposure level of Falconbridge residents to inorganic arsenic, the type most associated with health problems, was 6.1 micrograms per litre (ug/L) compared with 6.0 ug/L in Hanmer.



Wren

SOIL: largest study of its kind

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Total arsenic levels, which include exposure through air, water and food, were 9.1 ug/L in Falconbridge compared with 9.5 ug/L in Hanmer.

Pinsent told an audience of about 50 people that 80 per cent of the 369 people tested in Falconbridge and 321 from Hanmer showed exposure levels less than 10 ug/L. About five per cent in each community had exposure levels higher than 20 ug/L, which is consistent with other studies, said Pinsent.

People with higher levels were told to consult with their family physicians and to have more comprehensive

testing.

Pinsent explained arsenic has a short life in the body, and that 50 per cent or more of it leaves the body within two to four days.

Wren said a two-page summary of the results of the study will be mailed to everyone in Falconbridge and Hanmer who participated in it. He said the urinary arsenic exposure study is the largest ever conducted in Canada and will likely be used as a model for other communities.

A complete version of the 170-page report is available by contacting Butler at Falconbridge Ltd. at 693-2761, ext. 3356.