

Northern Life (online)

6/20/2003

Medical officer not worried about arsenic levels

The medical officer of health doesn't appear to be alarmed by high arsenic levels found in Falconbridge.

When asked whether she would eat vegetables grown in gardens there, Dr. Penny Sutcliffe replied, "Absolutely. If they were my garden vegetables I would rinse the them off with my garden hose, wash them inside again, and if it was a root vegetable I would peel them.

However, gardeners are encouraged by Sutcliffe to import cleaner soil into their gardens to be extra safe.

Sudbury Health Unit officials were in Falconbridge Monday knocking on doors and distributing information kits about how people can reduce risk to exposure to arsenic.

"Although arsenic at high levels can be harmful to health, such as skin and liver cancer or anemia, there are no expected immediate health concerns related to the levels of arsenic found in the Falconbridge area soils," says Sutcliffe.

The levels in Falconbridge were calculated at a much lower rate of 400 parts per million. Recent arsenic soil levels in the Wawa area were found to be higher at 900 parts per million.

Sutcliffe said that even these figures are not dangerous. "The health studies done there did not observe adverse health effects of the people," said Sutcliffe.

The Sudbury levels were confirmed by 2001 soils data released by the Ministry of the Environment. These same sample results are being extensively analyzed in the \$4.5-million Sudbury Soils Study, funded by Inco Ltd. and Falconbridge Ltd. It is scheduled for completion in 2005.

However, Sutcliffe did say that the many unknowns exist concerning arsenic levels, and other toxins in local soils.

Sutcliffe said most of the research related to arsenic and its health effects concern conditions in water and air.

"What we're hoping is that we are working toward understanding what these values, for example the 400 parts per million, mean for health effects here in Sudbury.

—Bill Bradley