

One Man's Crusade

From The Herald, Newfoundland.

Gerry Higgins is relentless. He admits it. In fact, he practically introduces each telephone call with an apology, excusing his persistence. His diligence is admirable and, at times, annoying. At one point his endless phone calls sparked a verbal exchange with this columnist. "Sorry if I'm being a nuisance," he offers, "but I'm not going away." I'm glad he didn't. Higgins is a 53-year-old widower. Just before Christmas in 2005, his wife Margaret, just 45, lost her five year battle with cancer. He wears the pain on his face like a mask and, in some ways, refuses to let her go, realizing that too many questions remain unanswered. Higgins is confident, if not convinced, that electrical transformers played a role in his wife's death, and he's advocating for a local study into the effects of overexposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) since his wife was initially diagnosed almost a decade ago. Just after exchanging wedding vows in 1980, the young couple settled down in a small bungalow in Norris Arm and started a family. That little nest, though, was enclosed by heavy power lines, which Higgins believes possibly played a role in her death. As reported in an interview with The Independent several years ago, he discovered that out of the 62 transformers in his town, there were incidents of cancer located close to 60. That's a heavy statement considering the modern world is powered by electrical transformers, and Higgins realizes he has many detractors, some who quietly wonder if his motives are financially-driven. "I don't want a nickel from this; I want a study," he says. Higgins, who's spoken to thousands of cancer victims, has support from scientists all over the globe, some of whom have been conducting research into the health effects of EMFs for decades. Trent University professor Magda Havas, who has spent years examining the issue, is one of Higgins' loudest supporters, noting he should receive a medal for his "tenacity and his desire to prevent others from experiencing the death of a loved one from cancer." She notes there is significant scientific evidence that the magnetic field from power lines and other sources is associated with breast cancer. "Epidemiological studies," she says, "show that magnetic field exposure, in a number of occupations, increases the risk of breast cancer in both men and women. This is especially true for women under the age of 50 with estrogen receptor positive breast cancer." Plus, studies with human breast cancer cells show that magnetic fields increase the growth of breast cancer and reduce the effectiveness of melatonin and tamoxifen. Melatonin is a natural hormone produced by the human body that is "oncostatic" — which means it reduces the growth of cancers. Tamoxifen is a drug given to breast cancer patients to reduce the growth of breast cancer cells. "I don't know if Gerry's wife used this treatment but if she did the drug would not be as effective if she remained in a high magnetic field environment." Margaret Higgins did take the drug. Lastly, according to Havas, studies with mice show that breast cancer, induced with a chemical carcinogen, appears earlier and grows more quickly when exposed to high magnetic fields. "Since 1 in 9 women in Canada is likely to develop breast cancer in her lifetime, anything that promotes the growth of breast cancer, even slightly, becomes a very serious health concern," she says. Simply put, Havas suggests moving transformers away from homes and making certain

that people don't live near power lines would be a step in the right direction. Gerry Higgins won't quit. I guarantee it. He vividly remembers the shock on his wife's face and the tears in her eyes when her doctor confirmed she had breast cancer in 2000. He watched her die, but truly believes others can be helped. He is calling for a study in this province, conducted by an independent body, to answer the question — Does living near a transformer and power lines increase your likelihood of developing cancer? "Surely this is a valid question and the government of Newfoundland and Labrador is in the position to answer it," says Havas. By funding an independent study, the government could put this question to rest, and hopefully give Gerry Higgins the answer he's looking for.

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