

New cases as cancer cluster fears mount

BY CARRIE FELLNER

THE cancer toll on Cabbage Tree Road in Williamstown has risen to 39, heightening fears of a cluster in the small rural community.

Fifteen new cases have emerged following the publication of a *Newcastle Herald* special investigation last weekend.

It revealed 24 cases of cancer along the road in the past 15 years, a number that was at the time described as seeming "high" by two epidemiologists who specialise in cancer cluster investigations.

All the cases have occurred among people who have lived within a sparsely populated five-kilometre stretch of acreages and hobby farms, immediately south of the Williamstown RAAF base. A network of drains carry water polluted with toxic chemicals off the base and through the properties, which have returned some of the highest pollution readings of anywhere in the 'red zone.'

The poly- and per-fluoroalkyl chemicals, also known as PFAS, are suspected carcinogens that have been linked to a number of health conditions, including impaired immune function.

Kim-Leanne King is stranded on a Cabbage Tree Road property with levels of contaminants in her bore water more than 500 times accepted health risk limits.

She was shocked to hear the chemicals could suppress immunity, after a case of the flu saw her hospitalised last year. Tests showed her white blood cell count was very low.

"They asked me the question, have you ever used IV drugs, because your immune system is like that of an AIDS patient," Ms King, who lost her father to bowel cancer, said. "I burst into tears. I was so upset that someone would think that. And that my immune system was not fighting for me."

Raeleen and Brian Russell were alarmed to hear of the number of cases on the road where they lived until 2007, before relocating to New Lambton.

Ms Russell, 62, was diagnosed with breast cancer last year and has undergone a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

"Our main concern is that I had my two sons and a grandchild living with us as well," Mr Russell said.

The couple were aware of the Williamstown contamination at the time of Ms Russell's treatment, and asked a doctor if it could have a connection to her illness.

"He told us: 'I can't tell you if it does or not. The only thing I can tell you is you've got to join a class action to stop these people from doing these things,'" Mr Russell recalls.



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**-Kim-Leanne King,
resident**

of Cabbage Tree Road

TOUGH TIME: Raeleen Russell had breast cancer last year and is worried about a connection with her former home on Cabbage Tree Road. Picture: Simone De Peak