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## QUESTION AND ANSWER

### LAKE EFFECT:

### Two Sisters and a Town's Toxic Legacy by Nancy A. Nichols



**Q** You grew up in Waukegan, Illinois playing with your sister on the once notoriously polluted shores of Lake Michigan. Years later, when you and your sister read the reports of contaminants in the lake and in the landfill near your home, did you ever wonder how you might personally be affected?

**A** No. No one in town really learned about the extent of the lake's pollution until after my sister and I left Waukegan. I was a reporter working in New York and she had moved further west in Lake County, Illinois by then. From afar, we followed the news of the pollution in our hometown. There had been some reports in the late 1970s but a lot of the news happened in the early 1980s—it was around that time that three highly polluted areas in my hometown were designated Superfund sites—so named because of the federal legislation that allots money to clean up toxic areas. In 1982 I wrote my first published piece about Waukegan's pollution for *The Chicago Tribune*, but the last thing on my mind was that it might affect us.

We didn't really consider that we might have been affected by the pollution until after she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 1992. It was then, in the midst of her treatment, that she asked me to write about her illness and its potential links with the pollution in our hometown. My book represents the fulfillment of a promise I made to her on her deathbed.

**Q** While researching the book, you underwent frequent and repeated health screenings, through which your doctor diagnosed your particular kind of pancreatic cancer. What effect did this have on you and writing *Lake Effect*?

**A** Fulfilling my promise to my sister, Sue, saved my life. If she had not had her cancer, I would not have known to look for mine. The book that was to be about my sister became a book about the two of us and the many possible health effects of the chemical contaminants in my hometown.

**Q Doctors were able to remove your pancreatic cancer, and eventually, you made a decision that few women are able to—you had your ovaries removed to prevent the possibility of developing the same kind of cancer that your sister had. What convinced you that this was the right course?**

**A** My case was a complicated one. My sister died of a very aggressive form of ovarian cancer at a young age. I then developed a different form of a deadly cancer at a young age. So I suspected there was a genetic component to our diseases. I also knew that we had had extensive exposure to toxic chemicals in our childhood. It is this dance between the environment and our genetic make-up that leads to disease—with one set of factors influencing the other. I felt I was at risk on both counts, and my doctors believed an operation was the right course. As one said to me, “What’s the point of beating pancreatic cancer and then dying of ovarian cancer?” It was his very accurate description of my circumstances that swayed me. I had my ovaries removed and endured a brutal surgical menopause that I write about in the book.

**Q What kinds of research did you do to try to fulfill your vow to your sister?**

**A** I hired researchers to help me understand the nature of the chemicals in the lake and in the landfill near our home. One scientist told me that every chemical known to be dangerous to humans was in one of the three toxic waste sites in my hometown—but the primary pollutant was a group of chemicals called Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs). There were one million pounds of sediment contaminated with PCBs in Waukegan’s harbor. I asked researchers to help me understand what it means for our bodies and our health when we’re exposed to these chemicals.

I also studied the way that the factories in the area operated, and the materials they used. The land along the lakefront had been heavily industrialized for decades, but at the time I was growing up the major sources of pollution came from a boat motor manufacturer—the source of the PCBs—and a manufacturer who used asbestos. I had been an editor at *The Harvard Business Review* and had worked on an article by a man who had run the Manville plant in Waukegan where the asbestos was used. When I contacted him, he told me that every single administrative person on his staff had died of a disease related to asbestos exposure.

I also had to learn about the natural history of the lake and how the pollutants in the lake worked their way into the food chain—particularly into a fish called the Coho Salmon. My father had been a big fisherman so I was particularly interested in this aspect of the problem. Fish are one of the main routes that chemicals lodged in sediment make their way into the food chain and ultimately into us. These fish created a direct and uninterrupted pathway from polluting factories to family dinner plates along the lakeshore—including my own. For much of the community, eating fish was part of our recreation, family economics, and religion, and there is no dispute that the fish carried PCBs.

**Q After all of the research and interviews, are you convinced that the polluted waters of Lake Michigan were the main cause of you and your sister's rare cancers?**

**A** No, there can't be certainty, but I believe that the chemicals in my hometown were at least an important contributing factor. There is no simple cause and effect with cancer and it can be close to impossible to pinpoint the cause of any one illness. There is a whole chapter in my book about the different standards of proof that might apply in this kind of case—legal, scientific, and plain old common sense standards. *Lake Effect* is an exploration of the kinds of exposures we all face each and every day and their possible ramifications.

So while I don't have a bullet-proof link between our diseases and our exposure, there is enough evidence that people should look closely at cases like ours—there is much to be learned from our experiences. For ages, people have relied on stories to warn each other of the dangers inherent in the environment.

Before there were statistics and double-blind studies, there were stories that warned of the link between certain illnesses and the environment. Shepherds, for example, learned to avoid pastures with certain kinds of clovers because they made their sheep infertile. Similarly, the phrase “mad as a hatter” comes from the poisoning suffered from the mercury that workers were exposed to while making hats. Stories such as these were told and retold and, as a result, formed a kind of health policy for the ages. Today, however, when we have vastly more exposures to many more agents, we often must tell more complicated stories. *Lake Effect* is my sister's story and mine, but it could be every woman's.

**Q Throughout your illness your doctors discouraged you from focusing on the cause of your cancer and instead encouraged you to put all your energies towards surviving. Why do you think the medical field is so hesitant to look at causes?**

**A** I think that it makes sense for individual doctors to put their main energies into saving their patients. The problem comes when each and every one of us fails to ask about the causes of cancer and instead focuses only on the cure. When we—doctors included—do that collectively we are choosing to ignore agents in our environment that may be causing us harm. There is a phrase for this kind of problem. It is called a tragedy of the commons. It means that when every one of us does what makes sense for us as an individual we actually fail to do what is right for society as a whole. That is why I argue forcefully in my book that we need, as a society, to ask why? To ask about the causes of our diseases even as we fight for the cure. I am particularly adamant about this in the case of children. Because of their low body weight, children can carry proportionally heavier loads of chemicals and there is evidence that these chemicals may be associated with learning disorders. I think it is children that may bear the brunt of this. This is an issue for the next generation.

**Q** Your story was situated on the Great Lakes; has enough been done to safeguard those lakes? Could a similar story be taking place right now?

**A** Right now there are some 43 designated “areas of concern” around the Great Lakes—these are highly degraded areas with a lethal mix of pollutants. In 2008 a report by scientists at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta showed elevated risks of certain diseases around these areas of concern. So, yes, it is very likely that there are people right now who are experiencing health effects as a result of pollution on or near the lakes.

**Q** *Lake Effect* is an intensely personal story that touches upon the universal since, as you write, “all of us have a lifetime of toxic exposures to contend with.” What do you hope readers will gain from the book?

**A** I hope they will gain a sense of the complexity of the problem of toxics and see this not simply as a book about my sister and me, but as a book about all of us. I started out to write a personal story, but I discovered a universal one. Each and every one of us carries a significant body burden garnered over a lifetime of exposures. In that way, this is not just a book about my sister and me, but a book about all of us.

I also hope that anyone who reads this book will realize that it is only in our common activities—our collective political will—that a solution will be realized. The European Union, for example, does a much better job of testing chemicals before they are used in production than we do here in America. As a result, we bring into our homes, put on our bodies, and eat all sorts of chemicals that have not been thoroughly tested. I think we must be very active as citizens and push hard for the regulatory changes that we need to keep us safe. America once led the charge in setting global environmental standards, today we lag in important ways. We can both aspire to and achieve global leadership in standard setting once again. Our lives depend upon it.