

Are we so arrogant?

High blood pressure, heart and respiratory disease, cancer, birth defects — rates here leap off the Ontario charts. Free Press reporters Kate Dubinski and Chip Martin look for answers in the air you breathe, the water you drink and the ground you tread.



CHIP MARTIN



KATE DUBINSKI

Now, gender-bending twists are being seen, raising fears the toxic environment is mping animal and human reproductive systems.

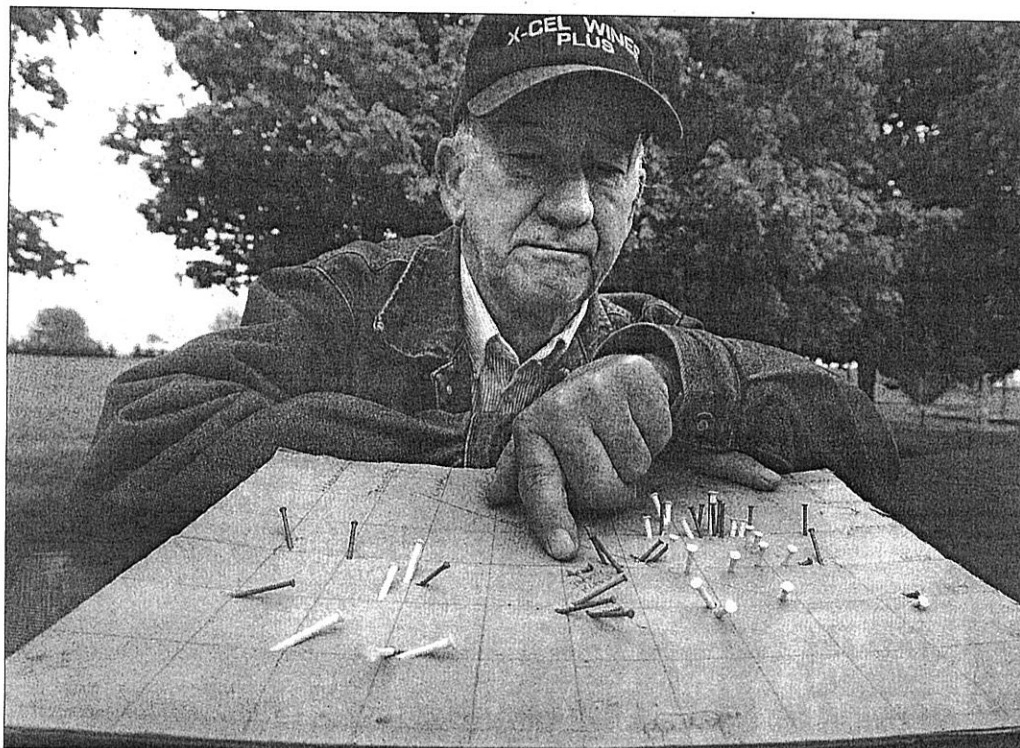
A sharp decline in male births has been noted among natives living nearby, and scientists have found "feminized" male turtles with smaller penises.

"We're seeing the feminization of wildlife — reproductive harm being done," said Jim Brophy, executive director of the Sarnia-based Occupation Health Clinics for Ontario Workers.

But Brophy, who's seen the effects of occupational cancer and lung disease, pointed to wildlife exposed to the environment — but workers — as the barometer of worry.

"The blue-collar community is acting as the canary in the coal mine for society, living out the actual (environmental) horrors before us," he said. "Are we so arrogant that we think all other forms of life are affected by what's in the environment and we're not?"

kubinski@fpress.com
martin@fpress.com



SUSAN BRADNAM Sun Media

GRIM SURVEY: Jim Duffy points to dark nails, representing cancer deaths downwind of the hazardous waste incinerator, on a board plotting the results of an informal household cancer survey area farmers ran along the concession roads near the plant. The white nails represent cancer survivors.

life lost — collected for the two health-planning agencies that geographically cover the area.

In the eight-county zone covered by the South West Local Health Integration Network, which takes in London, 5,341 potential years of life were lost for every 100,000 people from all causes of death in 2000-01.

In the rest of the southwest, Chatham-Kent and the counties of Lambton and Essex, the figure was 5,424 years of life.

For Ontario as a whole, in contrast, the lost potential was far lower — 4,864 years of life, or nine to 11 per cent better than in the southwest zones.

So, what's in the environment of the region, extending from the Bruce Peninsula south to Lake Erie, and west to Michigan from an area an hour's drive east of Toronto?

Plenty you know about — quaint yellow-brick towns and villages, prosperous cities, beautiful Great Lakes beaches and vast stretches of farmland.

But those images obscure the area's lurking environmental dangers, factors some say help to explain the grim health figures. Among them:

► The Great Lakes that lap the shores of the region, its main source of drinking water,

doubles as a sewer for the continent's heartland, taking in millions of kilograms of toxic substances a year, in water and air pollution, from the lakes' Canadian side alone.

► E. coli was the bacterial villain of the Walkerton crisis that killed seven people, washed by heavy rain into the town water system from cattle waste. A mountain of such manure — each year, millions of tonnes — is generated in the southwest, home to half of Ontario's livestock.

Using that waste to fertilize farm fields, where disaster may be only a downpour

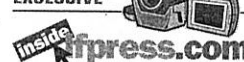
away, remains common, even with post-Walkerton rules to safeguard water.

► Antibiotic-resistant bacteria released into the region's environment through factory-style farming can travel through water and food into humans. These so-called superbugs can spark epidemics and feed diseases resistant to all medical help.

► The St. Clair River, home to Sarnia's Chemical Valley string of petrochemical plants, has a legacy of pollution that's left the river one of the top concerns on Canada's side of the Great Lakes.



WEB EXCLUSIVE



VIDEO: Farmers speak out. Click on the link in the Inside fpress.com box on our homepage.

We're fatter and older in the southwest than most Ontarians. And we also smoke more.

But that slight age gap and bad habits don't explain a grim, eye-popping reality for some scientists: Southwestern Ontarians are dying sooner and being left diseased — often, fatally — at rates far higher than Ontario averages, if not for the entire country.

High blood pressure, heart and respiratory diseases, cancers, birth defects — here, they all leap off the Ontario charts.

going green

The usual suspect explanations — genetics and demographics, the stuff that's in our bones and how the region's 1.5 million people are distributed by age and sex — don't account for the figures, either.

All of that dangles a disturbing question: Is our region's environment killing and poisoning us? To some, the potential links just can't be ignored.

"There are diseases here that . . . really stand out. They're not just higher, they're statistically significant," said Dr. David Hill, scientific director of the Lawson Research Institute in London.

A world-renowned diabetes scientist, who works at St. Joseph's Health Care in London, Hill said the region's location — where it sits in Ontario, and what's here — may be driving the numbers.

"Genetics, lifestyle and occupations — those are risk factors," he said. "But after all those are factored in, living in Southwestern Ontario is going to be determinant of health."

Troubling questions about tie-ins between the region's health and its environment also surface in another morbid figure — the potential years of