November 7, 2019

**Summary of the Tahoe Newborn Radon Program**

To Dr. Clint Purvance, CEO, Barton Health
and to the members of the Barton Patient and Family Advisory Council

Barton Health has the chance to become the 194th hospital in the US and the first in California to participate in the Newborn Radon Program. This is where all new mothers take home a free radon test kit (or a coupon for one) with their new babies. Providing healthy indoor air for babies and young children is vital and testing for radon is a major part of that. The risk of radon induced lung cancer for children is 4 times the risk for adults, according to the CDC.

Tahoe has higher radon concentrations than most communities in California because our granite happens to be high in Uranium which breaks down into Radium which breaks down into Radon. But unlike other radioactive elements which are solid and remain deep in the earth, Radon is a gas and it can travel up to the surface where it can accumulate to dangerous levels in our houses and buildings, undetected without a test.

Radon is the second leading cause of lung cancer and the first leading cause for people who don’t smoke (like little babies!). Radon induced lung cancer deaths are 21,000 a year, according to the EPA. California is possibly one of the lowest radon states but it does have hot spots, and Tahoe is one of them. Radon maps show that South Lake Tahoe sits on a Very High Radon Risk geological formation. 4 out of 10 houses tested high for radon in the South Lake area, according to the California radon test data base by Zip Code. And it’s no better in Nevada: Zephyr Cove had the highest incident of high radon houses in the entire state of Nevada and Stateline shows 7 out of 10 houses with high radon.

I attempted to get Barton to adopt the Newborn Radon Program for over 6 years, 3 of which I served on the Barton Patient and Family Advisory Council. Just this year Barton finally agreed to sponsor the program. I worked with Natasha Schue of the Community Outreach and Relations Department to design a professional-looking brochure and together we got the California Dept. of Public Health Radon Program to donate 400 free radon test kits for a trial. We were getting ready to announce the program in a press release in August when 5 pediatricians objected.

*The pediatricians unanimously* *felt there were two main problems.*

*1) Radon abatement is cost prohibitive for most of our families so we would be introducing anxiety and concern over a problem that they cannot afford to fix*

*2) There still is not medical literature that supports recommending radon abatement.  The US Preventative Task Force does not recommend screening, the American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend screening, and so we are not going to recommend screening.  By giving out the brochure, it looks like we are recommending it.*

*If there are low cost ways to reduce radon in the home (government subsidies for low income families), then we may be willing to reconsider our position.  Educate us to these so that we can educate our families.*

The pediatricians have not responded to my emails which addressed their concerns and have not offered to meet with me in person to discuss this, but here are my responses:

1. The U.S. Surgeon General has listed Radon as a Class I cause of lung cancer and recommends that *everyone* test their house.
2. I’m surprised the pediatricians confused lung cancer screening with house testing. Lung cancer screening involves CT scans of a patient’s lungs. No organization recommends this. Testing a house for radon involves a simple charcoal test kit. All government and health organizations that I know of recommend this.
3. Contrary to their argument, their own American Academy of Pediatrics recommends testing of all houses for radon. The presentation, Radon: Information for Clinicians, presented at American Academy of Pediatrics Environmental Health ECHO Conference May 2018 by Bryan Stierman, MD, MPH, Boston Children's Hospital recommends that primary care providers recommend that ALL patients test their house for radon.
4. Their argument that radon is too costly to fix so they would rather not know about it is almost laughable, if it was not so dangerous. It’s like a diabetes patient not wanting to know their blood sugar count because they cannot afford the meds or wanted to avoid the hassle of taking insulin. And wouldn’t doctors want to get the facts before they diagnose a problem and prescribe a remedy for it, even if some solutions are expensive? It should be up to the individual, not the doctor, to decide the risks and benefits and what they can afford.
5. Over 190 hospitals, each overseen by their own staff of pediatricians, have been using the program successfully, some for over 10 years. Our 5 pediatricians have a large pool of informed fellow pediatricians to consult with about their concerns.

So far the pediatricians have not returned my emails nor have I been invited to speak with them, so the program appears to be stalled. If Dr. Purvance can arrange a meeting with the pediatricians to address their concerns perhaps this program can still move forward and our babies can be protected.

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