

NO CLEAR CAUSE FOR CLEFT PALATES, LIPS IN 18 DICKSON INFANTS, STATE REPORTS**The Commercial Appeal (Memphis, TN)****February 17, 2001, SATURDAY, FINAL EDITION****SECTION: METRO, Pg. B3****The Associated Press**

No clear cause was found for the increase in cleft lip and cleft palate deformities in Dickson County infants, the state health department reported Friday. Eighteen children were born with the conditions over a 3 1/2-year period and health officials investigated whether environmental factors, genetics or maternal alcohol and drug use were the causes. The investigation - studying cases that occurred between 1997 and October 2000 - was conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the state Department of Health.

The defect is either a split lip or an opening in the roof of the mouth.

"Although specific risk factors associated with clefting were identified among the 18 case mothers, it is unlikely that any one factor examined in this investigation could account for the increased rates in the county," the report said. Researchers interviewed 15 mothers in Dickson County, which is in Middle Tennessee west of Nashville, about their health, pregnancy history, reproductive and family history, lifestyle, occupational exposures and multivitamin use. They found some risk factors present - including smoking during the first trimester, pre-term deliveries, and complications from diet-controlled gestational diabetes - but nothing that occurred with most mothers.

The health department said the study was hampered because Tennessee does not have a statewide birth defects monitoring system. "To have a statewide system would be an expensive program that would need legislation to create," said health department spokesman Diane Denton. "We require things to be reported on birth certificates, but we know most defects don't get diagnosed when the certificates are issued."

The involved families lived in all parts of Dickson County, and most used water supplied by the cities of Dickson, Charlotte and VanLeer. Drinking water samples of 10 families found no evidence of contamination.

The investigation came after a nonprofit birth defect research group conducted its own study into the defects. Birth Defect Research for Children in Orlando, Fla., last fall found that a well that temporarily provided city water tested positive for a toxic chemical solvent called trichloroethylene, also called TCE, in 1997. The solvent used in some industrial processes also showed up in a private well in 1991, according to the group's report.

The CDC recommended that the state continue to monitor Dickson County births, and said a more formal case study may be needed if rates continue to rise.