

— Woman tells of losing relatives to cancer



**BROTHER:** Mark Kerslake



**MOTHER:** Elaine Kerslake



**FATHER:** Kevin Kerslake



**COUSIN:** Denise Burns



**UNCLE:** Ivan Bilzon



**MEMORIES:** Anna Burns from Sorell last night looking through family albums containing photos of loved ones who have died. Picture: JAMES C.

# Mystery of a dying family

Anna Burns has lost her brother, her mother, her father, her uncle and her cousin . . . all to cancer. She says the surviving family members believe there has to be a link. And they are pointing the finger firmly at the landfill site that bordered their homes. **FULL REPORT: Pages 4 & 5**

By ELLEN WHINNETT  
Chief Reporter

FIVE members of a family who grew up next door to the Wentworth Park landfill site have died from cancer.

And their relatives believe toxins seeping from the former tip site may be to blame.

The Kerslake family has decided to speak out about the tragedies in their family to press the State Government for an inquiry.

"Most of the family believes there is a definite link," said Anna Burns, who has lost her brother, mother, father, cousin and uncle to cancer.

"There needs to be an inquiry."

In a shocking series of tragedies, cancer has claimed the lives of:

● Kevin Kerslake, 54, who died of lymphatic cancer in 1991.

● Kevin's wife, Elaine Kerslake, 62, who died of ovarian cancer in 1999.

● Kevin and Elaine's son, Mark, 42, who died in October last year of brain cancer.

● Elaine's brother, Ivan Bilton, early 60s, who died in the mid-90s.

● Ivan's daughter, Denise Burns, mid 40s, who died in 2001.

All five lived in houses bordering the former Howrah landfill site, which is now Wentworth Park.

While there is a history of cancers in Mr Kerslake's family, there was none in Mrs Kerslake's — until the disease killed her, her brother and her niece.

Ms Burns, the youngest daughter of Elaine and Kevin Kerslake, said the family had always believed there had been a link between the park and their illnesses.

She said they had decided to break their silence after reading about their former neighbour, who is fighting to have an inquiry established into the site.

In 1971, Kevin and Elaine Kerslake bought a house at 18 Correa St, Howrah, and moved in with their four

children — Jenny, Mark, Andrew and Anna.

Behind their house was an area of land used as a landfill for domestic waste. It was known as the Howrah tip, and is now the sports ground called Wentworth Park.

Mark Kerslake was one of Tasmania's most senior public servants.

He was just 42 years old when he died. He had been promoted to the position of secretary of the Department of Economic Development, and had a brilliant career ahead of him. His death struck the Public Service hard, and he left behind a partner and three young children.

Mrs Lopatniuk has been campaigning for years to have an investigation into whether toxins from the tip site were causing cancers and other illnesses in the area.

Her son Peter, 33, died of leukemia last December.

It appears little if any scientific studies have been done on the tip site over the years, despite Mrs Lopatniuk raising her concerns with various governments for the past 15 years.

Environment Minister Judy Jackson, who recently took over the portfolio in a Cabinet reshuffle, has said she will review what investigations have been done on the old site.

She is standing by advice from the Department of Health and Human Services that no cancer cluster is apparent across the suburb of Howrah.

But Ms Burns said the members of her family had all moved away from the suburb.

Directly opposite the ground, at 25 Silwood Ave, lived the Kerslakes' relatives, including Mrs Kerslake's brother Ivan Bilton and his daughter Denise.

The kids used to run across the tip site to visit each

other's homes all the time.

"We had gates on our back fences," Ms Burns said.

"The houses backed onto the old tip.

"We used to visit, I used to walk out our back gate to theirs."

and had been diagnosed with cancer while living in other areas.

She said their illnesses would not show up in a check of the Howrah postcode.

The Menzies Research Institute, which provided the data on which the Health Department based its advice, said their Cancer Registry was only able to determine cancer reports by suburb, and they could not be narrowed down to specific streets.

There is growing anecdotal evidence of high rates of cancers in residents who used to live next to the tip in the 1960s and 1970s.

"Dad died at Acton and mum died at Rose Bay," Ms Burns said.

"Mark died at Acton too. None of it would have shown up in Howrah."

At 37, Ms Burns, the youngest of the Kerslake children, said she had fears for her own health.

"It really puts the wind up the rest of us," she said.

While the old Howrah tip was supposed to be for domestic waste only, one former resident has said he used to dump oil there.

Another former resident told *The Mercury* that a man who used to work with the Clarence City Council work crews had commented that "everything used to go in there".

The families grew up and moved away over the years, although Mark Kerslake liked the area so much he bought the house next door at number 20 Correa St.

Poppy Lopatniuk lived across the road, on the corner of Bembil and Correa Sts.

Mrs Lopatniuk's son Peter died from leukemia last year at the age of 35.

She has compiled a list of 21 people who she says have died from cancer or other serious diseases.

For five years she has been calling for testing of groundwater contamination in the area.

Ms Burns said it was a friendly, close neighbourhood where everyone was good friends.

"Back then the whole street knew each other," she said.

When Mr Kerslake died in 1991, the family began to ask questions.

When Mr Bilton died, then Mrs Kerslake, they started to question possible links between the tip site and the illnesses in their family.

"There was heaps of discussion about it," Ms Burns said.

"I can remember Mark talking about it and he talked to Poppy a few times.

"After my dad died we looked at how many people had died in the same street and it was amazing."