

NEWS & RECORD

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Abandoned mines pose dangers

MICHAEL RUBINKAM AND
MATTHEW BROWN
Associated Press

Swaths of Pennsylvania and many other states are honeycombed with old, unstable mines that can cause the earth to suddenly give way and threaten people and property.

That's what searchers in Westmoreland County, just southeast of Pittsburgh, fear led to the disappearance of 64-year-old Elizabeth Pollard.

Pollard and a young granddaughter were looking for a lost cat when she went missing Monday evening. At about the same time, a sinkhole appeared about 20 feet from where she parked her car in an area above an old coal mine. The granddaughter was found safe inside the car hours later.

The search for Pollard turned from a rescue effort into a recovery operation Wednesday, as authorities said they did not expect to find her alive.

Mine subsidence has caused billions of dollars in damage in the U.S. In Pennsylvania, where mining dates to the late 1700s, coal was mined in almost half of the state's 67 counties and there are at least 5,000 abandoned underground mines, leaving behind hazards that officials say can arise at any time.

There are as many as 500,000 abandoned mines nationwide — far outnumbering those that are still active, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration. They dot the landscape of coal country and sprawling Western states where mining was common. People have died falling into them, and some murderers have tried to hide victims' bodies by dumping them in open mine shafts.

The sinkhole in Westmoreland County appears to have resulted from a



GENE J. PUSKAS, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rescue workers search through the night Tuesday in a sinkhole for Elizabeth Pollard, who disappeared while looking for her cat, in Marguerite, Pa.

catastrophic collapse, suggesting the roof of an old mine gave way suddenly after sagging for years, said Professor Paul Santi from the Colorado School of Mines Geology Department.

"If it's dropping say, half an inch a year, you can use satellite information to detect that and monitor if it is getting worse or not," Santi said. "But you can also have these really quick ones that are harder to predict. That's what happened in this case. You have this roof collapse and overnight a sinkhole appears."

The Marguerite Mine that authorities believe resulted in the sinkhole was last operated in 1952 by the H.C. Pick Coke Co., according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. The coal seam in the area is about 20 feet beneath the surface.

That's relatively shallow, adding to the chance of a sudden collapse in areas where the coal had been removed, leaving a void likely filled with air, water or debris that had washed in over time, Santi said.

The sinkhole that formed was teardrop shaped, Santi said, with a small opening above a

larger cavern. If the mine collapse was deeper it would have been cone-shaped and taken longer for the disturbance to reach the surface, he added.

Some mines used supports such as steel arches to prevent collapses. Others left pillars of coal in place to support the roof, but they don't always prevent settling over time.

The state Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation will examine the scene when the search concludes to see if the sinkhole was indeed caused by mine subsidence, spokesperson Neil Shuler said.

Old mines pose myriad dangers, with 381 people killed and 152 injured at abandoned mine sites nationwide between 2000 and 2013, according to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

In many cases, their owners simply walked away from coal or precious metals mines when they became uneconomical to operate and declared bankruptcy, leaving behind safety hazards and costly pollution cleanups that public agencies must handle.

Victims can drown in flooded shafts, get lost in underground tunnels

or perish from poisonous gases present in many old coal mines. Mine shafts can extend hundreds of feet beneath the surface and often are unmarked.

State and federal agencies sealed off many old mines. But more are discovered every year and officials have yet to conduct basic risk analyses on most of the abandoned mines on federal land.

Subsidence is a widespread occurrence, including a recent sinkhole in a neighborhood north of Rapid City, South Dakota, near where Santi grew up. "It's part of population pressure," he said. "We just need to do our best to map them and then getting people to avoid building on them — or at least knowing if they are deep enough that it's not going to be an issue for sinkholes," he said.

Besides the safety hazards, millions of gallons of water loaded with arsenic, lead and other toxic metals flows daily from contaminated mine sites without being treated.

Pennsylvania's abandoned mine agency has responded to 75 subsidence claims this year, and 578 since 2017, said Lauren Camarda of the state Department of Environmental Protection.

Subsidence has long menaced homeowners in the state's historical coal regions, so much so that in 1961 Pennsylvania began offering mine subsidence insurance to cover damage to homes or buildings. There are more than 62,000 such policies in force today, and the program has paid out on more than 2,200 claims.

Texas man charged with killing, burning son

JUAN A. LOZANO
Associated Press

HOUSTON — A father was charged with shooting and killing his adult son with Down syndrome, whom he claimed he mistook for an intruder, and burning the body in what authorities described Thursday as a "bizarre crime."

Michael C. Howard, 68, who is an attorney in Houston, told investigators he was at a home he owns in Sabine County, East Texas, on Sunday evening when he accidentally killed his 20-year-old son, Mark Randall Howard, with a shotgun.

Sabine County Sheriff's Office Deputy J.P. MacDonough said at a news conference.

Howard did not call the sheriff's office until Monday afternoon, about 17 hours after he used a tractor backhoe to take his son's body about 2 miles away to a remote area where more than 2,500-acre property, placed the body on a wood trash pile and then "cremated" him, MacDonough said.

Howard thinking his son was an intruder. Howard remained jailed in Sabine County on bonds totaling \$20 million after being charged with murder and tampering with evidence. Authorities said additional charges could be filed.

It was not immediately known if Howard had an attorney to speak on his behalf.



Howard

Donough said Howard told investigators he "cremated" his son in accordance with what he felt his son would have wanted. "It is a bizarre crime anywhere you are just because of the nature of the event," MacDonough said. "Mr. Howard committed this act and in the furtherance of that, burned the body and cleaned the crime scene, which as an investigator, I would take as indicative of nefarious purposes or for nefarious purposes."

Howard's son was diagnosed with Down syndrome but was high functioning and had a job, MacDonough said.

Two days before the shooting, authorities responded to a call Howard made in which he reported the theft of some property, including a large mower and a trailer. MacDonough declined to say if the thefts might have played a role in and his son arrived at the home — about 170 miles northeast of Houston — Thursday or Friday, authorities said.

Deputies found body parts and bones in the trash pile and sent them to the medical examiner's office in Jefferson County.

Howard told investigators the whole thing was a "horrible accident," Mac-

Study: Prenatal test can hint at cancer

CARLA K. JOHNSON
Associated Press

Many moms-to-be opt for blood tests during pregnancy to check for fetal disorders such as Down syndrome. In rare instances, these tests can reveal something unexpected: hints of a hidden cancer in the woman.

In a study of 107 pregnant women whose test results were unusual, 52 ultimately were diagnosed with cancer. Most of them were treated and are now in remission, though seven with advanced cancers died.

"They looked like healthy, young women and they reported themselves as being healthy," said Dr. Diana Bianchi, the senior author of the government study published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine.

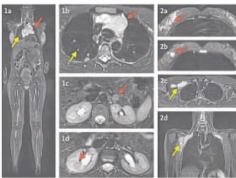
Of the discovered cancers, lymphoma blood cancers were the most common, followed by colon and breast cancers.

The blood test is called cell-free DNA sequencing. It looks for fetal problems in DNA fragments shed from the placenta into the mother's bloodstream. It also can pick up DNA fragments shed by cancer cells.

Of the millions of pregnant women each year who have a cell-free DNA test, 1 in 10,000 will get a result back that is unusual and difficult to interpret, neither positive or negative for a fetal abnormality.

This small number of people — perhaps only 250 a year in the U.S. — may be at risk for cancer.

"They and their care providers need to take the results seriously and have additional testing because



THE NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE

These MRI images with arrows indicating cancer were made during a study by researchers at the National Institutes of Health and published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine.

In that population there is a 48% risk of cancer," said Bianchi, who leads the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

The study looked at what should be done next, and the researchers concluded that it's best to do a whole-body MRI to look for cancer. A physical exam or taking a family history is not enough, Bianchi said.

About five years ago, commercial labs that do these tests and doctors started telling women with unusual results about the study.

The National Institutes of Health paid for study volunteers to travel to its research hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, where the participants had their family and medical histories reviewed, a complete physical examination, whole-body MRI scans and other tests performed. The research identified a recognizable "very chaotic" pattern in the DNA sequencing of the women diagnosed with cancer, Bi-

anchi said. The study is continuing to look for more evidence to indicate who should be screened for cancer.

Many medical groups now recommend offering cell-free DNA tests during pregnancy, though many expectant parents decide against the optional test. Considered reliable for detecting Down syndrome and two other disorders, the tests came under scrutiny for too many false alarms for extremely rare fetal problems.

The new finding will help educate doctors about a rare result of DNA tests in pregnancy, said Dr. Neeta Vora, director of reproductive genetics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who wrote an editorial in the journal.

Doctors who care for pregnant women are not accustomed to ordering whole-body MRI tests, Vora said, and these scans, which can cost \$1,000 to \$2,000, may not be covered by health insurance.

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