



Don't Drink the Water

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Description

In this brief case a chemical engineer is contracted by a small municipality to test drinking water. Upon finding a dangerous level of contaminants in the water, the engineer is stonewalled by the Utilities Commission manager of the financially strapped municipality.

Body

As a chemical engineer often contracted by the small municipality of Walkerville, Ontario to test drinking water samples, you have a first hand acquaintance of the difficulties faced by cash strapped municipal governments since they were burdened with the task of testing drinking water in private labs after 1993. The decision to shift responsibility for such testing was made by Michael Harrison's conservative provincial government as a way to cut costs and save tax dollars. But many in the know have been wondering if the real cost of such measures might not far exceed anything that could be fiscally measured.

A small, rural municipality such as Walkerville (pop. 5,000) simply cannot afford extensive or frequent testing (many homes have individual wells, making comprehensive testing even more difficult). And cutbacks in the Ministry of

Environment -- the provincial government body regulating drinking water standards -- prevent the ministry from capably staffing their offices. The result is a system with a number of gaps and lots of room for dangerous drinking water to go unnoticed.

However, earlier this month, in a test of water from Walkerville, your team did detect dangerously high levels of a particular strain (O157) of E. coli (Escherichia coli) bacteria (probably resulting from manure run-off in the heavy rains several weeks ago). In some ways relieved to have noticed before any harm was done, according to procedure you immediately alerted the Utilities Commission manager, Dan Groebel, clearly expressing what the water contained, the risks it posed, and recommending emergency action be taken. But that was 10 days ago and you have heard nothing more. Repeated attempts to contact Groebel and get some answers are not returned. Residents of Walkerville have no knowledge of the danger they might be drinking.

- What could have happened?
- As an engineer, what should you do?
- What are your options?
- What will you choose?

Notes

From a collection of cases compiled and edited by Dr. James K. A. Smith, Department of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, for his course "Engineering Ethics". Used by permission.

Editor(s)

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Discipline(s)

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Engineering

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