

Public Service, Serving the Public?

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During the past two years we have documented the concerns with rural drinking water in almost every issue of *The Rural Councillor*. We have challenged provincial and federal government departments to pick up the challenge of providing safe drinking water for rural people. Mostly our voice of concern has been ignored by politicians and government civil servants.

Then Walkerton happened where people died simply from drinking municipally treated water. Once the connection between water and dead people was made, the establishment (including some university researchers) went into damage-control mode and called it an isolated aberration. According to the dictionary this means "irregularity, lapse". They claimed it was literally a fluke. I disagreed on CBC's the National Magazine as I believe this is happening in rural Canada all the time.

The fluke with Walkerton was that physicians actually pinned down that water caused the problem. As one of the medical people stated during the Walkerton crisis: "We don't think too much of an elderly person having diarrhea before dying". With the link between water and dead people clearly established politicians are moving into various levels of damage control. People that die from waterborne illnesses will continue to be swept under the carpet, but not with the same ease they were swept under the carpet before Walkerton.

This also points to the problem that our ability to detect waterborne microorganisms that can cause human illness (such microbes are called pathogens) is limited. I am not just talking about E. coli and coliforms, I am talking about other bacteria, viruses and protozoan parasites that we don't

even test for. Detecting waterborne illnesses in rural Canada is like Russian roulette and unfortunately it can be as deadly.

Here in Saskatchewan we are now hearing about boil water advisories just about every week, but last year there was only one boil water advisory issued here. The Town of Eston, which picks up high-quality water from the South Saskatchewan River has even had to issue a boil water advisory. Is it a fluke that last year there were no problems with water in rural Saskatchewan, and this year it is becoming a common occurrence?

For Saskatchewan alone, Health Canada data indicates that our costs for waterborne illnesses are around \$10 million per year. If we use U.S. methods to calculate the cost of waterborne illnesses this number would increase several-fold. The difference is simple. In the U.S., a human life is worth \$9 million Canadian, while in Canada for people dying from waterborne illnesses there is no value attached.

Why do we have money pouring into veterinary medicine to make sure that our hogs don't get infected by pathogenic microbes? It is equally simple. When hogs get infected by pathogens, their meat production will be reduced. We know how much a hog is worth. We can put numbers on that loss. That's why agriculture agencies at both provincial and federal levels pour in money to avert pathogen attacks on hogs.

Do we need to put a value on a pound of human flesh before government agencies are going to start putting some serious money and efforts towards safe drinking water for rural people? How can we get the public service to actually serve the public? The answer to this question can be found in

the aftermath to Walkerton tragedy. We are starting to see the first steps being taken in Saskatchewan by the provincial government issuing boil water advisories on a regular basis.

The way government does business will never be the same again. There is one select group of people that will ensure that the cost of being in public service and not serving the public is simply too great. Lawyers. Look at the United States. Most environmental laws have been a result of lawsuits against government agencies and industry.

One drinking water incident where the water treatment plant distributed the parasite *Cryptosporidium* has now cost more than \$25 billion U.S. (Milwaukee incident in 1993). Mainly because of law suits. Partly because the more than 100 people that died were valued at \$9 million Canadian each.

Now, look at Walkerton. People died. More than 500 people were affected by the E. coli in the municipal water. Some were lawyers. One lawyer launched a lawsuit worth \$1 billion. Some lawyers on the defence side have been trying to minimize the value of a human life. Lawrence Mandell, an Ontario lawyer stated in regard to the above Walkerton lawsuit:

"I hate to put it so crassly but a two year old isn't worth a lot of dough"

This is true not only for Ontario, but for other Canadian provinces as well including Saskatchewan.

However, the financial settlements likely coming out of Walkerton will be many times greater than what Canada has ever spent on rural water quality problems. Instead of spending money solving the problems through research and development the money is going to try to repair the damage caused by unsafe drinking water. The costs to government agencies will likely be

high. The political costs are yet to be determined.

This same scenario has been played out in the U.S. for the past 20 years. The U.S. civil service at both state and federal levels are petrified of not serving the public. To ensure that every civil servant serves the public, the employment contract with the U.S. government clearly spells out that if the public approaches a U.S. federal civil servant, he/she has to respond, or delegate a response, within a very short period of time. Think about that next time you get shuffled around provincial and federal government agencies and don't get any answers.

This is also why U.S. regulations on drinking water are many times more stringent than what we have in Canada. In the U.S., laws regulate the production of drinking water, in Canada we have guidelines that are not legally binding. That's why polluting industries have strict operating permits, but in Canada depending on the province, operating permits based on politics, rather than science, are not uncommon. In Saskatchewan if we dig very deep, we will find that there have

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been only a couple of environmental convictions by federal and provincial agencies during the past decade.

The transformation of the Canadian civil service will come at a high cost because of its inherent resistance to change. I predict that Walkerton is only the first in a series of major lawsuits against government agencies. Sometimes it will be one level of government suing another, as each government level is scrambling to cast blame for not serving the public on somebody else.

Maybe it is only the municipal level that can truly serve the public. Dealing with the public every day and witnessing the challenges that the public is continuously exposed to, makes the municipal level of government uniquely able to serve the

public. Looking at the inside of the legislature every day, living city life, and rarely seeing real people (as opposed to fellow politicians), may just render the higher levels of government inadequately suited to serving the public.

To solve real problems in rural municipalities will, however, require unprecedented collaboration between municipalities both on the provincial and national level. Leadership has to emerge from the municipalities. Focussing on solving real problems like safe drinking water and proper environmental protection should originate at the municipal level as we strive to serve the public.

If provincial and federal civil servants and rubber-stamping politicians wake up and want to join municipalities to solve real problems in real time, that is fine. We have enough rural problems to share with anybody that wants to help. The formation of a Real Canadian Public Service at the municipal level would be able to better serve the public than any other level of government. Without the baggage, including law suits.

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