

Water safety can never be ignored

Fatal lessons should never be forgotten

It's the eerie silence that Bruce Davidson remembers most. It was a glorious spring day in his southern Ontario farming town, yet there wasn't a sound to be heard: not a child at play, not a ball bouncing, not a bicycle tire squeaking.

It was May 2000, and Davidson's hometown of Walkerton, Ontario had become, suddenly, silently, a town devoid of children — a town under siege from contaminated water.

Several days earlier, a tremendous rainstorm had poured down on Walkerton, washing soil from a pasture just 30 ft. away into one of the town's wells. The soil carried contaminants from animal manure, including the E. coli bacteria, and a deadly cocktail of bacteria ended up in Walkerton's water supply.

Seven people died and 2,500 others (in a town of 5,000) fell ill. A judicial inquiry followed, and last December two brothers — the local utilities manager and the water foreman — were found guilty of a series of missteps that, if avoided, could have prevented much of the illness.

That inquiry was the result of years of advocacy by a group called Concerned Walkerton Citizens (CWC), founded by Bruce Davidson. Davidson was in La Ronge last week for the 2nd annual Northern Health Conference, warning northern health officials and leaders of the perils associated with ignoring the state of our water supply.

While the streets of Walkerton were deserted after the tragedy, the local hospital was anything but quiet. "You'd see adults sitting in chairs, struggling to hold themselves up as spasms of pain wracked their bodies. It's the equivalent of drinking gasoline," Davidson recalled of the tainted water. "They could barely hold themselves erect, and some couldn't even do that."

In other chairs sat white-faced parents, clutching their ill children and listening to a sound overhead that still haunts Davidson: the steady beat of helicopter blades, as emergency transport teams swept in to airlift victims away.

"You'd wake up with this fear: who is it now? Who is ill? Who has died?," recalled Davidson. "It was like the grim reaper in the sky."

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Court injunction quells Métis mine blockade

A Métis blockade on two roads to northern mines was averted last week when Cameco received a court injunction to make the blockades illegal.

Representatives of the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan had announced last week that several members planned to block Highways 165 and 914, which are the routes to Cameco's uranium mine at McArthur River and mill at Key Lake. They hoped that a blockade would encourage the provincial government and uranium companies to consult with the

MNS about activities on what the MNS says are its lands.

However, a Queen's Bench justice granted Cameco an injunction last Thursday, preventing the MNS from interfering with Cameco's operations.

There had been word that the Métis would stage a blockade anyway, but on Friday some members simply stood by the side of the road as truck traffic to the mine continued, according to RCMP sources.

The MNS may appeal the injunction.




Photo by Carmen Pauls Orthner

With the ubiquitous glass of water beside the speaker's podium, Bruce Davidson delivered the keynote address to the 2nd annual Northern Health Conference about never taking water quality for granted. Davidson founded a citizen's group at Walkerton, Ont. after contaminated well water killed seven people and harmed thousands more.

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Wolves**
v. the Flin
Flon Bombers
Feb. 19, 7:30 p.m.
Mel Hegland Uniplex



The Ice Wolves
bounce
Kindersley back
down the road
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**Thursday, February 24, 2005
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7:00 pm**

For more information call Jacy - 425-3055

Water is everyone's business: don't be a bystander

Continued from p.1

The days and months that followed were no less surreal for Walkerton residents: the closed-down schools, the masses of media vehicles lining their streets, their town's tragedy played out every night on their TVs, the premier of Ontario blaming the previous provincial administration, the town's mayor refusing to declare a state of emer-

gency, the illnesses that emerged as much as two years after initial contamination, the judicial inquiry, and now a planned class-action lawsuit.

Over the past five years, Davidson's group has sought to address concerns and now also acquire financial compensation for the still-suffering victims of diseases such as irritable bowel syndrome, reactive arthritis and kidney failure. It has also worked to educate the public outside of Walkerton so that something similar doesn't happen again.

Davidson explained the numerous steps in the systemic breakdown: a shallow well, dug too close to farmland, and inspected only visually; a lack of operator training; falsification of records; several layers of bureaucracy that ignored warnings, overstretched health workers; and a system of "voluntary compliance" on water testing that resulted in no one taking responsibility.

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"No one player in this tragedy thought their role was pivotal in the protection of Walkerton."

— Bruce Davidson

Davidson warned the conference delegates. "You don't have to intend to do harm to do harm. Sometimes ignorance and arrogance will take you down the road you don't want to go."

Davidson repeatedly stressed the importance of accreditation and training for water treatment operators, as well as the need to have a clear set of guidelines in place so that personal and political concerns don't outweigh the need to protect the public's health.

"The more we can empower people and take them from being bystanders in their life to being active stakeholders, the more safe we'll be," Davidson said.

Walkerton's example shows clearly "the cost of

getting it wrong," Davidson said: a shattered reputation, loss of business, municipal insurance that is five times the average cost, and a population permanently crippled by post-traumatic stress disorder and physical illness.

The human cost is dramatic, from a four-year-old with the kidneys of an 80-year-old to a man whose hands shake in fear every time he raises a glass of Walkerton tap water to his lips. Davidson's own wife lives with daily pain from irritable bowel syndrome that every six weeks flares into spasms that, in Davidson's words, "make labour pains look trivial."

Walkerton's officials betrayed their commitment to keep drinking water safe. Davidson's plea is that northern Saskatchewan — or any region — never follow their example.

"The best tribute you could give to the people of Walkerton is to ensure that a tragedy of this nature never happens again."

Carmen Pauls Orthner, for The Northerner



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