

New Zealand towns' drinking water contaminated with lead

Tom Peters
12 February 2021

On February 2, Dunedin City Council (DCC) warned about 1,500 residents of the coastal towns of Waikouaiti and Karitane, in the Otago region in the South Island, not to drink tap water, after tests found it was contaminated with lead.

The council initially said a sample taken on December 8 showed 39 micrograms of lead per litre, four times the Ministry of Health's "acceptable" limit of 10 micrograms, based on guidelines from the World Health Organisation. Two days later, the council issued a correction: the sample in fact showed 394 micrograms per litre, a shocking 40 times the limit.

Asked by Radio NZ (RNZ) why it took so long to issue the warning, DCC officer Tom Dyer said the result was emailed from the laboratory to a staff member on December 18, but was left unopened because the individual was away on leave. Due to this extraordinary negligence, the population of the two towns may have been needlessly exposed to the contaminated water for nearly two months.

On February 4, Dunedin mayor Aaron Hawkins admitted to RNZ that "the first elevated spike was reported to the health authorities back in August of last year." There had been "six elevated results across 90 samples that were taken" since then. Hawkins defended not notifying residents until February 2021, saying the council had followed advice from public health authorities.

The source, extent and duration of the contamination in Otago all remain unknown. Residents are being offered blood tests to determine the severity of their exposure. Lead exposure can cause severe health defects, including life-threatening conditions. In children, it can cause neurological damage, behavioural and learning difficulties, anemia and slowed growth.

In pregnant women, consumption of lead can

heighten the risk of premature births. In adults, it is linked with kidney disease, cardiovascular problems, increased blood pressure, hypertension and infertility. Moreover, it is a cumulative poison that builds up over time in the teeth and bones.

In Flint, Michigan, 100,000 people were exposed to lead-contaminated water for 18 months from mid-2014, due to government cost-cutting and negligence. This caused as many as 276 miscarriages and a 12 percent drop in the fertility rate, according to one study. Thirteen people died from Legionnaires disease due to the polluted water supply.

Residents in Karitane and Waikouaiti are outraged and demanding answers.

On February 5, the Public Health South agency held a public meeting in Waikouaiti, addressed by Otago Regional Council chairman Andrew Noone, mayor Hawkins and others. Hundreds of people attended with many expressing anger at the lack of information and the council's slow response. The *Otago Daily Times* reported that residents told the assembled officials: "We're pretty bloody angry about the whole situation" and "Your reassurances don't mean much."

DCC infrastructure services committee chairman, Councillor Jim O'Malley, said the water appeared to be fine most of the time, but added that towns around the country did not frequently test for heavy metals such as lead.

One resident told TVNZ: "I think it's absolutely disgusting because it's been two months since we've known anything about it, and I'm a great tea drinker." Boiling water heightens the concentration of lead.

Waikouaiti resident Ashleigh Barry told RNZ she was pregnant when she moved to the town with her husband and their baby about six months ago. Last month, she learned that her unborn child had kidney

problems. “If my child’s kidney issues are in relation to lead then I don’t know how I’m going to have any sort of easy time accepting that [the council] down-talked it and downplayed the seriousness of it so much,” she said.

Karit?ne mother of three, Jazhr Hansen, told TVNZ her children and her mother had been having “really bad stomach pains.” She said: “I’m genuinely scared for my family and their health ... it feels like an absolute nightmare I can’t wake up from.”

Whatever the source of Otago’s lead contamination, it highlights the criminal lack of investment by successive National Party and Labour Party governments to ensure safe drinking water, particularly in rural areas. While lead contamination is rare in New Zealand, scientists have for years warned about excessive toxins in drinking water, such as nitrate from nitrogen fertiliser used in farming. According to ecologist Dr. Mike Joy, the high levels of nitrate in drinking water could be linked with New Zealand’s high incidence of colorectal cancer.

In December 2017, a government-commissioned inquiry found that 20 percent of New Zealand’s drinking water was “not demonstrably safe,” meaning at least 759,000 people could be exposed to disease-causing contaminants. It found that there were about 35,000 cases of acute gastrointestinal illness contracted via reticulated drinking water each year.

The inquiry was prompted by a campylobacter outbreak in the town of Havelock North in 2016, probably caused by sheep faeces in the water supply, which made thousands of people sick and was linked to four deaths.

In response to the inquiry, Attorney-General David Parker, part of the recently-installed Labour Party-led government, told the media that the previous National Party government “has for at least five-years known that water supplies have not been doing their duty and the Ministry of Health and those responsible for them have effectively failed New Zealanders.”

However, three years later, thousands of people remain at risk from contaminated water. The Ministry of Health’s 2018-2019 report on drinking water quality, published in June 2020, stated that only 76.2 percent of water supplies “met all standards for drinking water quality.” A report from the Ministry for the Environment, *Our Freshwater 2020*, released last

April, revealed that the majority of rivers and lakes in both urban and rural areas are polluted, raising the risk of illness if councils fail to properly test and treat drinking water taken from rivers.



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