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Leadership and fecal coliforms: Walkerton 2000

Leadership, like love (or pornography), is easily recognized yet difficult to define. But among the key attributes of a leader is the ability to make important decisions with imperfect information while at the same time keeping an eye on the horizon, envisioning the longer term.¹

Few of us are leaders. But when the occasion presents, some people, simply by doing their jobs with care and diligence, demonstrate a quiet leadership. The Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit and its Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Murray McQuigge, showed such leadership in the afternoon of Sunday May 21 when they issued a boil-water advisory to the 5000 residents of Walkerton, Ont. Acting without much evidence that the municipality's water system was contaminated (and, in fact, with assurances from the local public utilities commission that it wasn't), McQuigge sounded the alarm.

His report of the epidemic of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection that resulted in over 2300 cases of illness and 7 deaths makes for grimly fascinating reading.² It reveals, for example, the quiet leadership of Dr. Kristen Hallett, an Owen Sound pediatrician who reported the first 2 cases of bloody diarrhea to the health unit. Correctly interpreted, as it turns out, by the health unit staff, her report led to a search for other cases. By the end of the day, the health unit had uncovered another 14 cases of diarrhea severe enough to receive medical attention and had begun to look for causes.

Environmental contamination of ground water and inadequate drinking water quality are not new problems. In Walkerton, for example, it was known to the town and successive provincial governments since at least 1980 that some of the town's wells were contaminated with surface water and had unacceptable bacterial levels.² If this prob-

lem exists in Walkerton, it undoubtedly exists in many other small municipalities — and not just in Ontario. In addition, about 20% of private wells in Canada do not meet minimal standards for bacterial contamination.

The unstoppable trend toward the globalization of just about everything, coupled with a tendency for Western governments to decentralize powers to regional levels, works fine for some aspects of our lives. But most of us are not very "global." We all live in specific places, in local environments, and we must attend to those environments. We must not abandon our municipalities to global competition and the increasingly multinational and rootless private sector.

Federal and provincial governments are being swept along by these trends without fully recognizing the implications for public safety and health and for their own roles and responsibilities. It is just not good enough to devolve governance to the private sector without adequate regulation, monitoring and accountability.

Although leadership is readily recognized, it can be just as conspicuous when absent. Federal and provincial environment ministries have failed to provide this leadership for a long time. Political ideology (let alone expediency) is not leadership. As the Walkerton inquiry is painfully teaching us, where there is no collective leadership much rests on the responsible actions of individuals in positions of trust. Sometimes merely the exercise of due diligence is enough. — *CMAJ*

References

1. Gardner JW. *On leadership*. New York: The Free Press; 1990. p. 48-54.
2. *The investigative report of the Walkerton outbreak of waterborne gastroenteritis, May-June, 2000*. Owen Sound (ON): Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit; 2000. Available: www.srhip.on.ca/bgoshu2/_private/Report/SPReport.htm (accessed 2000 Nov 2).