NOVA: Poisoned Water

Water Unit Extra Credit

BIOL 120 - Lansing Community College

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Flint, Michigan. Once one of the leading automotive cities, Flint has been home to General Motors since 1947 (GM, n.d.). Unfortunately, the City of Flint will not be remembered for their hard-working Americans that put in countless hours to support the fickle auto-industry. Instead, they will be remembered as a city that allowed their residents to suffer through a series of tragic events, unsupportive of their own people, while government officials stood by idly, unconcerned over the consequences of their decisions.

A city on the verge of bankruptcy, former Governor Snyder appointed an emergency manager to *“save”* the city. April 2014, the City of Flint switched their water supply from that of Lake Huron as it was supplied by the City of Detroit at a premium, to the Flint River in an effort to save money. The idea was to construct their own pipeline to Lake Huron, allowing them to subvert the overhead imposed by Detroit. However, this system was not yet in place and would take many years to build. In the interim, the solution was to supply the water needs with that of the Flint River; after all, they already had an old water treatment facility just sitting around waiting to be used. (NOVA, 2017)

Troubles did not wait to begin once the switch happened. Rusty, foul smelling water spewed from the residents’ faucets. It took LeeAnne Walters’s persistence and a lucky connection with an EPA Water Regulation Expert, Miguel Del Toral to get the ball rolling as nothing was adding up. Walters’s residence would soon become known as *Ground Zero* as she had her water tested, returning a whopping 397 parts per billion (ppb) on the second testing (15ppb is the limit by the EPA). Upon further investigation of the system, Walters and Del Toral found that Flint had not employed any corrosion control into the water, allowing the chemicals to eat away at the protective barrier built up over the years within the pipes themselves, eventually allowing lead to leach into the water as it passed through. Seemingly at every turn, Walters was shut down by government agencies, the same agencies that were in place to protect their citizens from harm; Del Toral was even labeled a rogue employee, not to be trusted. (NOVA, 2017)

Walters’s would not rest. Her constant demand for answers and the progress of the story of Flint’s water eventually caught the attention of Marc Edwards, a professor of Environmental Engineering at Virginia Tech. Realizing the City of Flint was not going to be helpful in this investigation, he enacted a group of volunteers to test the entire city’s residential water paralleled with dissection of numerous Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The hard work had finally paid off with science to prove it: Over 40% of Flint homes had elevated lead and as many as 8,000 children under 6 years old were exposed. (NOVA, 2017)

Edwards’s expertise coupled with a report from Dr. Hannah-Attisha, MD of the Hurley Children’s Hospital that offered a before-and-after snapshot of lead levels in children’s blood, was the breakthrough needed to convince government agencies that they needed to dig deeper into this crisis. The findings were appalling. Scientific testing was altered to guarantee adequate (passing) results and emails were examined showing lack of concern for Flint residents. The investigation resulted in 13 criminal indictments, including tampering with evidence, conspiracy and willful neglect of duty (NOVA, 2017). All of this for a city trying to save a few dollars on their water bills and it ended up costing more than one could measure - the lives of our future, our Michigan children, have been forever irreversibly altered.

The reporting seemed relatively objective, they even interviewed the former Mayor of Flint briefly. They presented a lot of facts that lined up with what I previously knew from other research on the topic. Whether it was *fair* is probably a matter of opinion. To me, fair would be giving the other side a chance to defend their actions, but this is not the kind of opportunity you give people like that. Given this was recorded in 2017, I was able to have future knowledge into what was going to happen after the filming took place to use as a gauge also. Overall, I think the information was clear and accurately reported.

The whole ordeal is sickening and so many people passed the buck. Ultimately the state is now trying to mitigate the damages by cleaning up and replacing the pipes and offering free bottled water. But, I feel this is all far from over. These residents, and very importantly the children, are going to need lifelong care for this *stupid* mistake. The same *stupid* mistake that so many tried to brush under the rug. The same *stupid* mistake that had the government just swallowed their pride and dealt with it in the first place, would have potentially saved so much for these families. As a parent, I cannot fathom the unrelenting pain and rage that must burn inside for justice, knowing what we know now. My heart aches for the citizens of Flint. This was a difficult way to go about *saving money* and I hope that we (as a collective species) learned a great deal from these mistakes as so to prevent anything near this ever again.

**References:**

General Motors. (n.d.) *Flint Assembly.* Retrieved from <https://plants.gm.com/Facilities/public/us/en/flint/news.html>

NOVA. (2017, May 31). *Poisoned water* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/video/poisoned-water/>