

To chlorinate or not to chlorinate: That should not be the question

By ACSH Staff — March 8, 2011

A new Wisconsin bill sponsored by state Sen. Sheila Harsdorf (R-River Falls) and Rep. Erik Severson (R-Osceola) — who is, sorry to say, a physician — [aims](#) [1] to repeal a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) rule requiring all municipal water systems to disinfect their drinking water by chlorination. Although 88 percent of Wisconsin municipalities already chlorinate their water, the remaining 12 percent that comprise 66 municipalities don't. According to a study by the Environmental Protection Agency Advisory Board, about 13 percent of acute gastrointestinal illnesses are caused by dirty drinking water in these non-disinfected areas.

While Sen. Harsdorf and Rep. Severson argue that the DNR rules, which went into effect last December, go beyond federal mandates and could cost as much as \$2.9 million to implement, ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross believes their new proposal “portends the way you start cutting into bone when you attempt to trim fat from the budget. Those officials who are attempting to revoke the mandate to chlorinate local drinking water supplies are being penny-wise and pound-foolish.”

In a 2008 study, Mark Borchardt, a leading infectious groundwater disease specialist and a staff member with the Environmental Protection Agency Advisory Board, monitored 14 water systems that don't disinfect and installed an ultraviolet disinfection system into half of them. He found a decrease in the incidence of diarrhea and vomiting in communities with the added UV disinfection.

Dr. Ross stresses that those municipalities that don't mandate chlorination of public water systems are asking for a major water-borne outbreak, much like the one that killed 104 people and sickened another 400,000 in Milwaukee, Wisc. when the *Protozoa cryptosporidium* bacteria infected the water supply in 1993. “Unlike the advisories that warn households to filter their water due to trace levels of pesticides or discarded drugs that have no health ramifications, chlorinating water is an important element to public health,” he says.

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