For Immediate Release: Contact: Dr. Murray McQuigge

May 29, 2000 (519) 376-9420

Lab Results not Given to MOH

- Walkerton E-coli Outbreak -

"Deputy Minister of the Environment Stien Lal stated today that the district office of the Ministry did not notify the Public Health Unit, as required, of irregular results from Walkerton water samples taken in the period from January 31 to May 3, 2000. I would like to confirm that this is true. I was not notified," says Dr. McQuigge.

When asked if the MOH should have received notification from the Ministry of Environment of irregular test results Dr. McQuigge said, "The Ministry of Environment must make a determination as to whether the test results signify an unsafe water supply. In the event that the results do show an unsafe water supply, the Ministry must notify me. Let me quote from 4.1.3 of the Ontario Drinking Water Advisory (see Background). 'If the water contains any indicators of unsafe water quality for any of the reasons outlined above, the laboratory will immediately notify the MOEE District Officer who will immediately notify the Medical Officer of Health and the operating authority to initiate collection of special samples and/or take corrective action.'"

The public should be aware that as a result of the Walkerton Water situation Public Health water testing labs across the province have been deluged. Dr. Chagla, Director of the London Public Health Lab, told us his lab has sent out 13,000 water bottles to agencies in its jurisdiction. They tested 1400 water samples on Friday May 26 alone; that is what they would normally test in two months. The public-access phone lines for water sample results have been so inundated the lab has doubled the number of phone lines to 16 lines. I encourage people with private wells to be responsible in requesting a water sample," McQuigge says. People waiting for test results who are concerned about the safety of their water should boil their drinking water.

Reports have shown that people are fearful of visiting Walkerton, or associating with residents of Walkerton who are visiting elsewhere, for fear of contracting E-coli 0157. When good hand washing practices are observed there is no likelihood of the E-coli bacteria being transmitted. The primary means by which E-coli bacterium is transmitted from person to person is by hand to mouth. "I have heard of a Walkerton sports team being relegated to separate sleeping quarters when at an out-of-town game. This is unnecessary and hurtful to the people of Walkerton. Residents of Walkerton should be treated with consideration and not treated as if they are contagious. They have been informed of the precautions they need to take. If they take those precautions they are not a risk to others."

The two basic precautions to be taken to avoid transmission are:

- Residents of Walkerton should continue to boil their water for 5 minutes or use bottled water for drinking. Handwashing with soap, using a dilute solution of 1.5 ounces of liquid household bleach in 10 gallons of water for rinsing your hands, is an effective way to prevent
hand-to-mouth transmission. Commercial handwashes, such as those you might find at a pharmacy, are not a substitute for handwashing.

- People suffering from diarrhea should avoid preparing food for other family members, or should ensure that they wash their hands thoroughly after going to the bathroom, and before preparing any food.

To date, the Walkerton hospital currently has three inpatients, one in critical condition, Hanover Hospital has one inpatient and the Owen Sound hospital has four children listed in stable condition and sent one child last evening to London. Children's Hospital of Western Ontario, located in London, is currently caring for 12 children. London Health Sciences Centre has four adult patients. There are three other hospitalizations in other health unit jurisdictions.

BACKGROUNDER

Ontario Drinking Water Objectives

(Ontario Ministry of Environment and Energy (MOEE), Revised 1994)

PREAMBLE

The Federal-Provincial Subcommittee on Drinking Water has the responsibility for developing the Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality. This subcommittee is made up of representatives from each of the Canadian Provinces and Territories, Environment Canada and Health Canada. It was established in 1986 by the Federal/Provincial Advisory Committee on Environmental and Occupational Health. The Conference of Deputy Ministers of Health approve all guidelines.

While most of the objectives listed are adopted from the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines, the Province of Ontario has set some unique aesthetic objectives for colour, dissolved organic carbon, sulphates and methane. Health related objectives unique to Ontario have been set for total dioxin plus furan, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) and N-nitrosodimethylamine (NDMA). In this edition there are 44 new objectives for organic compounds of which 26 are pesticides.

The provision of a satisfactory supply of drinking water is to a large extent dependent upon the availability of sufficient quantities of high quality source water. While virtually any source water can, by treatment, be made suitable for drinking purposes, generally the more contaminated the supply the greater the treatment costs.

Provisions for the protection and enhancement of ambient water quality are outlined in the document entitled "Water Management". This publication and the Ontario Drinking Water Objectives are companion documents - the former containing ambient water quality objectives, the latter treated drinking water objectives. Care should be taken not to confuse the two.

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