May 25, 2000

Yesterday there were questions of the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario and myself about whether we had acted with all possible speed to warn the citizens of Walkerton that their water might be contaminated.

I would like to discuss this and tell you what we know now.

On Friday May the 19th of last week the Grey Bruce Public Health Unit was notified of the two cases of bloody diarrhea referred from the Walkerton Hospital to Owen Sound Hospital. We phoned the Walkerton Public Utilities and asked if the Walkerton water system was safe and secure. They said that it was.

On Saturday, May 20th, when more cases were seen we again phoned the Walkerton PUC twice to ask if the water system was safe and secure. They said it was.

On Sunday, May 21st, when all the evidence we were getting was pointing to a contaminated water supply, despite being told that the water system was safe, the Public Health Unit told the people of Walkerton not to drink the water.

We took our own, independent water samples Sunday, May 21st and Monday, May 22nd, and, on Tuesday, (May 23rd) morning we received word from our Public Health laboratory that the Walkerton water showed contamination.

When we confronted the Walkerton PUC with these test results Tuesday, (May 23rd) morning, we were told two things:

First, that the machine that puts chlorine into the town’s drinking water supply had not worked properly for some time.

Second, the PUC had taken a water sample on Monday May 15th and had received a fax on Thursday, May 18th, from their testing lab saying that their water was contaminated. They did not report this to us on Thursday nor did they tell us this on Friday, May 19th and Saturday, May 20th, when we phoned asking if their water system was safe and secure.

This resulted in us looking for a possible food source of contamination, on Saturday, May 20th in the town of Walkerton to try to explain what we were being told. On Sunday, May 21st, our investigation pointed to the water supply and we no longer believed what we were being told by the Walkerton PUC and we issued a Boil Water Advisory to the town of Walkerton and phoned the mayor to inform him.

We told these findings to Walkerton town council at a meeting that we called for with them at 2:00 PM on Tuesday, May 23rd.

Last night the Chief Medical Officer of Ontario and I decided that we could no longer wait for the results of the Ministry of Environment investigation. We felt that the public and the people
of Walkerton should know that what has happened and is happening is not a mystery. This could have been prevented.

I would just like you to know that the staff of the Grey Bruce Public Health Unit have done the very best that we could and continue to do the very best that we can to protect the health of the people of Walkerton given the information that we have.