

Constitution Home Edition

Tuesday, 5/30/2000

News

A1

E. coli danger high for months?

Ontario town battling bacteria, fear

M.A.J. McKenna / Staff,

Walkerton, Ontario --- At this time of year, with new growth laying a haze of green over the wet fields, the farm country around this small town smells faintly but distinctly of manure. It's a rich, warm aroma, appropriate to the place that bills itself on road signs as "Canada's foremost cattle county."

But follow the dip in Hwy. 4 over the Saugeen River and down into Walkerton, and the smell changes noticeably. It is acrid and ammoniac. It hits you in the back of the nose, and it is weirdly familiar.

It smells like a swimming pool.

It's bleach. All the people living in Walkerton, and most of the objects out in public --- doorknobs, store counters, cafe tables --- have been washed or been swabbed with a potent mixture of chlorine bleach and water. It is the most effective way to kill the bacteria that has contaminated their water system and invaded their lives: E. coli O157:H7.

Since the outbreak was made public a week ago, a toddler and four older women have died, and a fifth woman is close to death in the local hospital. Eleven children are in intensive care, with five children and three adults on dialysis. Overall, about 1,000 people in this town of fewer than 5,000 have had some combination of the fever, cramps, diarrhea and disorientation that the bug can cause, and more than 30 a day are still reporting to the emergency department.

It may be the largest E. coli outbreak in North American history. It may also be the longest in duration.

Evidence emerged over the weekend that the contamination may have been present for months before the area's health officer defied the local water department and issued an emergency order to boil the local water.

Yet on the almost deserted streets of Walkerton, there is little anger.

"This is not an emotional society, " said Joel Axler, who moved to Walkerton 18 months ago from Toronto. "People are extremely compassionate, and they are forgiving --- maybe too forgiving."

Axler began getting symptoms in late winter, he said. By early May he was sick enough to cancel engagements, including a friend's 50th birthday party, that took him away from town.

"I wasn't sure what was wrong, " he said. "I travel around Ontario, and I thought I'd eaten something bad somewhere."

That was the reaction in much of Walkerton for weeks. Then townsfolk began to notice too many children and neighbors getting sick, and despite putting their heads together, they couldn't think of a restaurant or an event that could account for so many cases of illness.

On May 18, Dr. Kristin Hallett, a pediatrician in a hospital 45 miles away, recognized the symptoms of E. coli in two children who attended the same Walkerton school.

She alerted Dr. Murray McQuigge, the public health officer. He has since said local utility officials denied any water problems three separate times. Three days after Hallett discovered the first

cases, McQuigge issued a boil-water advisory through the local radio station. Utility officials did not admit the problem until three days after that.

Meanwhile, air ambulances had begun to buzz overhead. Walkerton's hospital is small, and its beds filled quickly. The more seriously ill patients were taken to Owen Sound, where Hallett works, or to critical-care units in London, Ontario, more than two hours' drive away.

Schools and most businesses in Walkerton are closed, and signs have been placed on sidewalks: "Our prayers are with you" outside Pizza Delite; "Pray for the children of Walkerton" at the Tim-Br Mart, one of whose employees has a 4-year-old daughter in serious condition.

At the local hospital's small emergency department Sunday, Jayme Blue bounced energetically on a children's play set, laughing at the view she got from hanging upside down. Her manner was a sharp change from a week earlier, said her father, Glen Blue. He and his wife, Melanie, had been sick, but Jayme had been worse, listless and with bloody diarrhea.

Now she was back for her third blood test, required every other day until the bacteria is cleared from her system, he said. "We're still pretty tired, but she has so much energy you wouldn't know she's been sick."

As he talked, visitors filed through the emergency room, clutching sample containers marked with an orange "Biohazard" warning. Some moved painfully slowly; a man in his 30s, in a windbreaker and worn jeans, had to be helped out of his car.

Except at the hospital and the arena and community center where residents gather for donated water and bleach and disposable cups and toothbrushes, Walkerton is unnervingly quiet. Playgrounds are empty; children are being kept indoors.

Some businesses have stayed open, but none could be called busy. There is no house-to-house mail delivery in town, so the post office doubles as the town square and meeting place. The few residents who trailed in and out looked shell-shocked. Fearful of contamination, they ruefully declined to shake hands.

Outside the post office, Anna Errington, a 20-year resident, struggled to explain Walkerton's close-knit nature.

"When I first moved here, my minister was my uncle, and the one who came after him was my mother's third cousin," she said. "I have third and fourth cousins for a 60-mile radius."

Walkerton is less than 150 years old --- it was founded as a mill town to process wood from a swamp, the Queen's Bush, that lies to the west.

Many of the old stones in the tiny graveyards that dot the margins of Hwy. 4 bear the same last names. Perhaps that history explains the small-town cohesiveness in this crisis, even as residents drive out of town for showers, boil their drinking water for at least five minutes, and swab their children and homes with bleach.

"Somebody messed up," the Rev. Suzanne Hollands of St. Thomas Anglican Church said Sunday morning in her sermon. "But we all make mistakes, even mistakes that cause death. There is so much pain, but we know we all have to stick together."

To some American eyes, Walkerton's reserve is striking --- a demonstration, perhaps, that while the United States holds up "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as the highest values, Canada's constitution calls first for "peace, order and good government."

No plans to hold a town meeting have been announced; no one has called for one. An attempt at a demonstration drew two protesters. When the head of Ontario's government came to town last week, one resident shouted at him, but others asked for his autograph.

Townfolk have stuck together. A prominent columnist for the Post, a national newspaper, has praised them for their sense of privacy. Over the weekend, garage sales went ahead as planned.

"I see an awful lot of people doing yard work, " Axler said. "They're fixing and painting and banging holes in trees. It's a way of sublimating."

But just as bleach left on too long will rot fabric, there are signs the fabric of Walkerton is beginning to fray. Six law firms have announced plans for lawsuits, including one launched over the weekend that asks for \$1 billion in damages.

The legal action is controversial, further dividing residents who already feel betrayed by elements of life as basic as the neighbors they live next to and the water they drink.

If the lawsuits go forward, they will keep formerly little-known Walkerton in the public eye for a very long time.

"This friendly little town that never had an identity to the outside world is going to be thought of forever as the epicenter of a national disaster, " Axler said. "It's so sad."