

Illness linked to raw milk in Minnesota

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) says it has found more evidence of illness linked to the consumption of raw dairy products from a farm in Sibley County.

The Hartmann dairy farm was implicated in an outbreak of E. coli O157:H7 infections in May and June and ordered by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to stop selling milk until unsanitary conditions were addressed.

But now the MDH says it has identified new cases of raw milk-related illness, including three people infected with *Campylobacter jejuni* and four people infected with a parasite called *Cryptosporidium parvum*.

MDH officials say they're not just focusing on one farm but are warning individuals of the overall risks of consuming raw milk. The department says it has identified 47 other people since Jan. 1, 2010, who became ill after drinking raw milk from a variety of sources throughout the state.

They say that "people need to think carefully about those risks before consuming raw dairy products from any source, and people need to know that the risks are especially high for young children."

■ COLUMN: Report slams ER closures

Failing grade for health care system

CHRISTINA BLIZZARD
QMI Agency

A "shocking" new report sounds the alarm bells about the quality of health care in rural and northern communities.

The Ontario Health Coalition (OHC) will release a report next week that says rural and northern patients feel they are "lesser than their urban counterparts," when it comes to health.

"The testimony we heard across the province was shocking in the total lack of any hospital planning to meet population need for services," said OHC spokesman Natalie Mehra.

"It showed such a high-handed disregard for all of the voices of community members, elected municipal government, physicians, nurses, hospital staff," she told me Thursday.

The report says there's widespread mistrust of the controversial government-appointed Local Health Integration Networks, (LHINS) that are responsible for implementing massive changes to health care in communities across the province.

"Public opposition to the LHINS and the erosion of democratic principles in hospital boards and public policy is universal," the report says, and recommends they be phased out over three years.

The report also calls for a

moratorium on closures of hospital emergency departments and is asking the government to develop a province-wide plan to ensure timely services for trauma victims in rural areas.

The report says ambulance response times can be 30-45 minutes for traumas from car and farm accidents in rural areas. The OHC recommends services should be on average 20 minutes from residents' homes, and, at most, 30 minutes away.

The report also calls for an investigation into the Niagara-area cuts.

"It is this panel's opinion that the provincial government should send an investigator into the Niagara Health System. There is a very high level of public anger at the hospital board," the report notes.

More than 1,150 people across the province attended the OHC hearings in March.

Bed closures are forcing patients to drive long distances for care.

The closure of outpatient rehab in places like Kincardine and Cobourg means patients must now travel as much as 100 km for treatment. The same goes for patients who need dialysis. Imagine undergoing dialysis two or three times a week — and then having to travel a great distance home.

New Democrat critic France Gelinas was part of the health coalition panel that travelled the

province.

"There has been a systemic push to take services away from rural areas of Ontario and bring them closer to the bigger centres," she told me Thursday.

"This has come with a tremendous cost to the small rural and northern communities."

A hospital is the heart of a small community, she said. Closing it can be devastating.

"It is the social fabric of the community, because in the smaller community the hospital is a hub. They bring the critical mass of workers and professionals that help the communities on many fronts," she said.

Health Minister Deb Matthews had not seen the report and would not comment on it directly.

"We are absolutely committed to providing the best possible health care to people, no matter where they live in the province," she said. The ministry has its own panel of rural and northern experts looking at health care.

"I am very much looking forward to seeing what they are recommending and moving on their recommendations," Matthews said.

Sometimes good health care isn't just a matter of dollars and cents. It's a question of common sense. When patients are forced to drive long distances on often snowy roads to get the care they need, it makes no sense at all.

Walkerton water centre officially opens

DON CROSBY
Sun Times correspondent

It's been 10 years since Joe Heisz and Colin Reesor suggested that Walkerton should have a centre where municipal drinking water operators could get the training to prevent a disaster like the one that struck the community in May 2000.

"I take my hat off totally to the people of Walkerton who conceived of the idea and certainly the Ministry of the Environment played an important role partnering with the people of Walkerton. They have achieved something very significant," said Justice Dennis O'Connor, who was among more than 100 people at the official opening of the \$8 million centre on Thursday.

The establishment of a clean water centre was one of the 121 recommendations O'Connor made in his landmark report after a public inquiry that looked into the contamination of the Walkerton water system that killed seven people and made more than 2,500 sick. All of the report's recommendations have been implemented by the provincial government.

age of clean water. In the meantime he said that Ontario industries are getting in on the burgeoning worldwide demand for clean water technology.

"Our province is becoming a world-class hub for innovation in water technology, and the centre will play an integral part in our approach," Gerretsen said.

He referred to the clean water centre as an example of how good can come from tragedy.

"You see that as a result of the public inquiry that was held here for over two years, the recommendations that Justice O'Connor came up with in a very thoughtful way, how the community also developed some of its own responses by having a clean water centre located in Walkerton and see it come to reality, you realize that good things can come out of very bad situations," said Gerretsen.



O'Connor

Former CEO Saad Jasim boasts that the centre has already trained more than 10,000 operators from across the province. Three mobile training vehicles take information into remote areas of Ontario. The centre operated in temporary quarters at first.

Centre board chairman Rui de Carvalho acknowledged the commitment of former chairman Murray Elston. "He was the one who really had the vision and really understood and helped to transform this into a reality," said de Carvalho.

Brockton Mayor Charlie Bagnato said the WCWC will stand as a reminder of what can go wrong without proper safeguards in place.

"This internationally recognized learning institution will ensure that many decades from now the world Walkerton will be synonymous with safe, clean water," Bagnato said.

Carol Mitchell, MPP for Huron-Bruce and Ontario's Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, recognized the long years of hard work that went into the planning, design and construction of the centre.

"It came from an idea from the inquiry

and how hard you worked as a community to make that happen, so for me today it doesn't get any better than this," Mitchell said.

High school teacher Chris Peabody, who heads up the co-op program at Sacred Heart High School in Walkerton, sees an opportunity for local students to benefit from the science, information and technology available at the centre.

"It's a fantastic building and world-class technology and we hope to have co-op students working alongside the scientists. For students going into science it will give them an advantage going off to university," said Peabody.

Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound MPP Bill Murdoch, who did not attend the opening of the centre, noted that it was the former Harris Progressive Conservatives who initiated the public inquiry and its recommendations which led to establishment of the stringent provincial drinking water regulations.

On Saturday, as part of a public water day in Walkerton, the clean water centre will hold a public open house from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. The centre is at 20 Ontario St. in the East Ridge Industrial Park on the east entrance to town.