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Walkerton may face long wait for safe water

WALKERTON — The possibility that scum within Walkerton wells may be insulating deadly bacteria from disinfectant could mean residents will have to rely on bottled water until the fall, the region's medical health officer said Monday.

Citing a recent paper that says *E. coli* in scum is 2,400 times more resistant to chlorine than it is in water, Dr. Murray McQuigge said his agency may need to research the problem before approving the town's water system.

"That's not going to happen quickly," said McQuigge, predicting it will be September or October before he lifts the boil-water advisory.

"The overlying problem here is that there's never been a municipal water supply contaminated with *E. coli* 0157 before," he said.

"So it's not just a case of adding chlorine into the lines and then saying 'That's that.' . . . We have to be extremely careful and cautious."

A massive disinfection project to clear all pipes of bacteria is expected to continue until at least mid-August.

The medical officer spoke with reporters following a brief ceremony in which he received an award of merit from Ontario's Association of Local Public Health Agencies.

The award recognizes McQuigge's

handling of Canada's largest ever *E. coli* outbreak. The Walkerton epidemic has killed at least seven people and infected up to 2,000 others.

Provincial police and an independent judicial investigation have been ordered to probe the incident.

McQuigge issued a boil-water order May 22 after hearing of suspicious illnesses among Walkerton residents, even though town officials assured him there were no problems with the water.

He later made lab tests public showing deadly *E. coli* contamination in the water and revealed that some Walkerton officials knew of the contamination before the health unit stepped in.

Meanwhile, Walkerton residents were becoming frustrated Monday by an Environment Ministry decision to supply the town only with bottled water and to end the use of bulk water tankers as a source of potable water.

The health unit had expressed concerns that the water came from a well in the nearby community of Teeswater, which doesn't use chlorine disinfectant.

Bulk water supplies in Walkerton should contain chlorine to aid in the further disinfection of any piping systems it touches, said McQuigge.

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Bruce Nuclear Power Development Plant employees raised \$13,700 for Walkerton *E. coli* victims through a gate collection recently. Most of those funds will be matched by United Way. Pictured from left are: Ray Applebaum, member of United Way board of directors, Karen Todd, Bruce Grey United Way president, Walkerton Kinette president Cindy Ernewein, Kinsman Brian Nogler and John Thompson, executive director of United Way of KW and area.