



WATERLOOCHRONICLE <http://www.waterloochronicle.ca/news/article/164561>

What's in the water?

Local man suspects allergic reaction linked to his close proximity to water tower

Bob Vrbanac, Chronicle Staff

Published on Feb 25, 2009

When Robert Falla developed a red, itchy rash on his hands, he did what most of us would do — he went to see his family doctor.

His doctor thought it might be eczema and gave him a prescription for a cortisone cream. The Waterloo man was told that it should clear up within the week after daily applications.

"I had no idea where it was originating," said Falla. "I hadn't changed detergents or anything like that which you would immediately suspect."

When the condition didn't clear up for what is now going on seven months, the retired computer industry worker started suspecting another source. And all he had to do was look out his backyard window.

Looming a couple of storeys over his Waterloo home in the northwest corner of the city is a mammoth water tower.

Falla started to suspect that there was something in the tower that was causing his problems. He wondered what else was being collected by the massive steel structure.

"One thing I noticed is that anytime I would wash my hands — even with just water, no soap, my hands would burn," said Falla. "And it wasn't from the heat of the water. Obviously it's being irritated by something."

The last time he could remember having a similar reaction was a couple of years ago. He went in to his bathroom for a quick shower and came out with his skin crawling.

"I was all pink and itchy," he said. "I thought, what the heck is going on?"

Falla contacted Waterloo regional water operators to see if they could help him find some answers. They agreed to come out and test his water.

"A couple of years ago they refurbished this tank," said Falla, who has been in his home since 1999. "I think it took a year for it to come back online, and I often wondered what kind of harsh chemicals they might have used because this started after that.

"But I was assured that before it was brought back online it was fully tested and fit within the parameters, and there was nothing in there that was going to bother me."

However, the testing did reveal that his water was slightly above the high end of the scale of 1.5 milligrams per litre, but still within provincially mandated safety requirements. Falla's water tested at 1.56 milligrams per litre on Jan. 16 of this year.

It was also then that he was made aware that the Region of Waterloo uses chloramine — a combination of chlorine and ammonia — to disinfect the water. Chloramine has been used as a substitute to chlorine to kill harmful bacteria in the water for the past five years since the Walkerton water disaster.

Since that tragedy, the province has mandated that there be a consistent dosing of chlorine through to the end of the line of the water distribution system to prevent the waterborne illnesses. Chloramine helps hold that chlorine dose longer.



Robert Falla shows some of the scarring that has occurred since he's had an allergic reaction that he blames on the chemical concentrations coming from a nearby water tower.

But Falla's concern is that he's receiving it at higher doses since he's at the starting point of the distribution system. And he's not the only one who has been affected.

His 10-year-old grandson Evan Diebel paid him a visit last week from his home near Hanover. When he jumped into his grandfather's shower he had a similar reaction — turning pink and complaining of itchy skin.

His grandson is normally exposed to well water, and had never had a reaction before.

"I never said anything about my problem to him," said Falla. "I thought that was really interesting."

Falla has done some of his own testing since, taking the advice of a friend and neutralizing the tap water in his home. It's a process that aquarium owners are quite familiar with, and he was symptom free.

Falla wonders why they can do that for fish but not for people. And he doesn't know why he should refit his house with a charcoal-based filtration system to make the symptoms abate.

"They're not concerned about what's at the front end," said Falla. "And it's not the same level as the end of the line."

"I think it's a little overkill."

Nancy Kodousek, the Region of Waterloo's director of water services, said they are working in the parameters mandated by the province.

"We are mandated by the Ministry of the Environment in terms of what the water quality is for both chlorine and fluoride," said Kodousek. "They regulate the requirements for treatment through the Ontario water standards, and also the Health Canada standards, and they provide the guidance and regulation on what levels of chlorine can be in the water."

In terms of possible health effects, Kodousek said that was a question for the local health department and recommended that anyone with those complaints see their physician.

Henry Garcia, the manager of the health department, said there are people who do have a hypersensitivity to a lot of environmental factors. And they're seeing it more and more often.

He hasn't heard of anyone in particular reacting to the chemical found in the local municipal water supply.

"The maximum is 4.5 parts per million," said Garcia, about the chlorine standards. "It's very low."

"But I do understand that sometimes people who live in close proximity to water-treatment plants and similar installations, that because they're at the beginning of the line they may perceive the odour of chlorine more often than others down the line."

But the safety parameters are never exceeded and he doesn't think it's a factor unless it's been reported by the family doctor.

"There are ways of rectifying chlorine very simply," said Garcia. "Whether this gentleman is relating the smell to his physical reaction, I can't tell."

"I know this area does have very hard water, and if your water softener isn't working properly, it sometimes gives you that itchy feeling."

In addition to wondering about the chlorine, Falla started wondering about another additive unique to Waterloo — hydrofluorosilicic acid — which is added to the water for fluoridation purposes.

But when he asked the region if they could check for that, he was told they would need the City of Waterloo's permission. He was surprised by the city's response.

"They told me they wouldn't do the test," said Falla. "I was told that they tested the fluoride level at the source so there was no reason to test it at my house."

"How come they didn't use the same excuse for the chlorine test? What are they hiding?"

Falla has his ward councillor Angela Vieth asking city employees the same question, but still hasn't got a response.

Vieth said she was surprised by the city's reaction and has forwarded a request for information to the city's water department and the chief administrative officer's office.

"I don't understand why," said Vieth about the city's reluctance to allow for testing of Falla's water for its fluoride concentration. "I forwarded his concerns on and asked for someone to please follow up with him.

"I really don't know why that's a problem." "I really get the impression that they don't want to admit there's a problem because if you don't admit there's a problem then there's nothing to solve," said Falla about his quest for an answer.

"I live in the city and pay taxes," he said. "I'd like to think that when I have a problem the city is as concerned as I am."

WATERLOOCHRONICLE
.ca

<http://www.waterloochronicle.ca/news/article/164561>



Metroland West Media Group
DIGITALMEDIACENTRE

© Copyright 2008 Metroland Media Group Ltd. All rights reserved. The reproduction, modification, distribution, transmission or republication of any material from this Metroland West Media Group website is strictly prohibited without the prior written permission of Metroland Media Group Ltd.



METROLAND
West Media Group



torstar
digital