

**Wayne Askew**  
**Testimony for Public Hearing re: Water Quality and Contamination**  
**9/7/2016; Albany, NY**

Good morning honorable members of the New York State Senate and Assembly. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify today regarding the water quality and contamination issue. I would like to specifically address the problem regarding contamination of water with lead.

My name is Wayne Askew, I am a resident of Willseyville, NY, which is just outside of Ithaca. I have been a lead advocate in New York State for over 30 years. My last testimony on the lead issue was at the lead abatement hearings chaired by State Senator Charles Rangel, here in Albany in the mid-1990s. I, myself, have been exposed to lead over a seven-year period in the 1980s, during service in the United States Navy and as a housepainter in Ithaca, NY. In 1987, I was diagnosed as lead poisoned with a blood lead level of 69 mcg/dL. But this would not be the last time I would get poisoned. After my first poisoning, I was chelated and then told it was safe to go back to work with new OSHA standards that were put in place at that time. Unfortunately, these new standards proved to be inadequate and I was poisoned again that same year, despite following new safety protocols. The second time I was poisoned, my blood lead level was 80 mcg/dL. My body started to suffer the consequences of being exposed to such a potent neurotoxin, and I was told I could no longer work. I lost both my health and my livelihood. I will go into further details on the health impacts lead had on me in a moment, but I want to point out that although government organizations such as OSHA recognized the dangers of occupational lead exposure, grinding operations for the restoration of old homes can still be seen to this day in Ithaca and others areas of the state. Little has been done to stop this.

So what does this have to do about water? As I'm sure you are all well aware from the recent developments in Flint, MI, and other areas of the country—including right here in New York State—water is coming up contaminated with lead. This is a very serious concern, as the amount of lead it takes to do irreversible brain damage on a child aged five years and younger can fit on a tip of a pin! The impact of lead exposure can be very serious both to the individual and to society in general. Although I was exposed three decades ago, I continue to live with the aftermath of what lead did to my body and my mind and, in fact, my symptoms continue to worsen with time.

My symptoms started with weakness and fatigue back in the 1980s. As you could imagine, finding a local physician with in-depth knowledge of the effects of lead poisoning proved to be a daunting task. As such, I ended up in the care of the Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, where I was treated by both Dr. Stephen Levin and Dr. Jaime Szeinuk for almost two decades. I have been diagnosed with severe toxic peripheral neuropathy and toxic encephalopathy. My ability to walk is limited and I am in severe chronic pain. My brain suffers from both dementia-like and ADD-like symptoms. All of my symptoms continue to get worse over time. I am living with the horrible effects of what lead can do to a person and feel that it is my duty to warn others.

When it was brought to light that lead was found to be a contaminant of the drinking water in the Ithaca City School District, I attended the very first meeting in the Town of Enfield. Lead in water is of particular concern to children, as they can absorb up to 50% of lead that is ingested<sup>1</sup>. In addition to concerned parents and members of the community, officials from the Ithaca City School District and the Tompkins County Health Department were present. I was

appalled at the outdated information that was being presented at this meeting. Of particular concern was the following:

- 1) The director of the Tompkins County Health Department stated that it was not necessary for parents to get their children tested. With the extremely high levels of lead found within the school's water system, I knew that this was not prudent advice and advised parents to talk to their children's health care providers about getting their children tested.
- 2) Apparently New York State deems a lead level of 10-14 mcg/dL to be an appropriate actionable level, when the CDC (since 2012) has recognized 5 mcg/dL to be of concern in children. Furthermore, the CDC makes it clear that there is really no safe level of lead in a human being. Not once at this meeting in Enfield was the CDC's information presented, which was disgraceful given that parents were there hoping to receive the information that they needed to help keep their children safe.

Given that my son attends school right outside of Ithaca in the Candor school district, I expressed my concern to the school officials about the possibility of lead-contaminated water there. Towards the end of the last school year I was reassured that testing would be soon completed and that the results would be communicated to me. As of late, I have heard nothing further on the status. Here we are today where it is the first day of school for many children across New York, and not all parents can be reassured that the water that their children are drinking is safe. As such, my son will continue to bring his own bottled water from home.

Incidentally, bottled water is under the purview of the FDA not the EPA; the FDA has adopted an acceptable level of 5 ppb of lead in water versus the EPA's 15 ppb. As it appears, the water sitting for sale on your grocer's shelf is more regulated than the water that our children

drink in school. It's time for New York State to take a hard look at this issue and strive to lead the county in policies that ensure water safety for all.

Thank you for your time.

### **References**

Goldman, R., & Hu, H. Adult Lead Poisoning. In: UpToDate, Post J Elmore & L. Park (Eds.), UpToDate, Waltham, MA. (Accessed on September 5, 2016.)