

## Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

*Tuesday, July 11, 2017*

### [Not all water systems are created equally](#)

Drinking water, instead of calorie-dense sugar-sweetened or caffeinated beverages, is the healthiest choice for children and adults alike. For those living on Peterborough's municipal water system, there's even the added benefit of fluoride for stronger teeth, a great value for those who can't afford to see a dentist. And turning on the tap for a nice cold drink of water may be something that most of us take for granted. But not all water systems have been created equal and there are still households in our community where drinking the water from the kitchen tap may not be safe. There are some rural households on private wells that may not be testing or treating their water; others that draw their water from lakes or rivers. It's never a good idea to drink surface water without filtration and disinfection. In addition, both Hiawatha and Curve Lake First Nations are still waiting for government funding to build water treatment facilities for their residents. Something as basic as access to safe drinking water is not a given for all of us.

The Walkerton water tragedy of 2000 led to landmark changes in the way Ontario protects its communities and the water they drink. Here in our area, the provincial Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (MOECC) regulates and inspects municipal systems (e.g. Peterborough, Millbrook, Lakefield, Norwood, and Havelock), communal systems in subdivisions (such as Buckhorn Estates and Elgetti-Crystal Springs), as well as year-round trailer parks such as Sama Park. Smaller drinking water systems like those found in resorts, seasonal parks, restaurants, churches, recreational or municipal facilities such as arenas are regulated and inspected by Peterborough Public Health. We work with these smaller operators to determine the risk to human health and to customize a treatment and maintenance program to address that risk. When we inherited Peterborough's 360 small drinking water systems in 2012, over 100 were deemed to be at high risk. The good news is that over the last five years, we have seen that drop to only eight, thanks to the cooperation from our local owners and operators.

Many residents in Ontario don't realize that private well owners and seasonal waterfront homes that use lake water are on their own when it comes to ensuring that their drinking water is safe. Part of rural living is the likelihood that drinking water will come from a well and that household sewage will rely on a septic system for safe handling and disposal. Such is the complicated reality of our beautiful rural and wild landscapes here on the land that drains into the Trent Watershed.

Ontario's Clean Water Act mandates each watershed to develop a protection plan to keep water safe today and for generations to come. Septic systems are a threat to the safety of our watershed, as are other activities that can impact water quality like farming and industry. It is up to each property owner to responsibly maintain their septic system so that it is not discharging harmful human waste into the



environment and possibly into our watershed, where it can contaminate someone else's drinking water supply.

It is important to understand where our drinking water comes from, and to protect our watershed as a collective responsibility. It is something we own and should cherish together. Both Curve Lake and Hiawatha First Nations have been working for years to install wells, water treatment facilities and a distribution system to provide all of their residents with a safe source of drinking water. I know that the Peterborough Board of Health considers this to be a top priority – and one that should be resolved. Both federal and provincial governments have committed to addressing the lack of safe drinking water in First Nation communities. I can't think of a better way to celebrate our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of nationhood than by ensuring equal access to such a basic human need.

*Word count: 647 words*

For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>