

A man with a mustache and glasses is shown in a close-up, pouring a pink liquid from a small glass vial into a test tube. He is wearing a white t-shirt with "ISO 14001" printed on it. The background is slightly blurred, showing some greenery and a building.

Ian Farion
of OCWA
tests
Walkerton's
water.

OPSEU members test the waters

When the water-borne E. coli 0157 hit Walkerton in May, leaving seven dead and some 2,000 miserably sick, OPSEU members were there to help.

Earla Clark, a registered practical nurse at the Walkerton hospital, had seen nothing like it in her 27 years at the hospital. "In emergency, there were 40 people waiting to see a doctor, where we normally have four to five."

Earla, vice-president of Local 275 at the South Bruce Grey Health Centre, describes chairs lined up down the hall, volunteers busy taking names, water and juice bottles piled high along the walls.

A helicopter, normally rare, stood by 24 hours a day to airlift the sickest patients to the London Health Sciences Centre.

"You never came into the emergency room when there wasn't a baby crying."

Stories by Megan Park, Photos by Alison Kennedy, Canapress

The lab was hectic. "No one realized at the beginning the extent of the outbreak," said Shirley Read, a laboratory technologist for 26 years at the hospital. Fast decisions responded to the ever-changing situation.

The boil water order was issued May 21. For the first few days, staff worked from 7:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Then extra staff came in and an afternoon shift was added.

In two weeks, they clocked over 1,000 hours of overtime, taking and testing blood and urine samples so doctors could track patients' kidney function. E. coli 0157 can cause kidney failure in children and seniors.

In those two weeks, the lab handled 890 adult and 509 paediatric blood samples.

The lab's turnaround and accuracy impressed paediatricians in from Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children.

They did about 50 times the normal number of children's blood tests, Shirley said. "It's stressful taking blood from young children. They're sick, they don't understand why you're doing it and it hurts. Our lab assistants and volunteers did a great job."

Donations of toys helped ease the trauma.

"You'd go home at night and your mind wouldn't stop thinking about the situation. It was hard to sleep," said Carol Shantz, a laboratory technologist and steward in Local 275.

"Many of us knew some of the families affected," said Carol. "We had first hand interaction with the sick and our prayers were with them."

Other hospital departments had different pressures. Maintenance staff worked with the Ministry of Environment and the Ontario Clean Water Agency to bring in water tankers and install temporary supply lines. Dietary



Earla Clark

staff couldn't use tap water as they made coffee and muffins for people waiting in emergency and freezies for the children.

Across the street from the hospital, members of Local 276 work at the Grey Bruce Owen Sound Health Unit. The health unit sounded the first alarm over Walkerton's water.

"It was a pretty intense time," said Local 276 president Kim McDougall-Hodge.

"We were dealing with hundreds of calls a day and probably the same number of people coming to the counter," Kim said.

As well as getting information out, public health inspectors helped the Ministry of Environment and the Ontario Clean Water Agency with water sampling. Inspectors from other areas came in to help,

working evenings and weekends to answer the public's questions.

As *Our Ontario* went to press, Walkerton residents continue to boil their water.

OPSEU members who live outside of town say they feel guilty about being able to go home. "We get a break from it," said Linda Alexander, a dietary aide.

Gerry Hope has lived all his life in Walkerton. President of Local 225, he is a correctional officer at the Walkerton jail. Two members of his family suffered in the outbreak.

"The hardest thing is not knowing when things can return to normal," he said.

Local 225 donated \$500 to a trust fund for families affected by the tragedy. OPSEU has set up a fund to help. Donations may be made at any Bank of Montreal in Ontario (account 0032-8097467) or to the OPSEU regional office at 1038 Second Avenue East, Owen Sound, N4K 2H7. ▲



Gerry Hope

Walkerton's water claimed an OPSEU member

Betty Trushinski, 56, was one of seven people who died from tainted Walkerton water.

A member of Local 275 at the South Bruce Grey Health Centre she was a 28-year employee in the dietary department.

"The thing we remember most about Betty, is that she was always bubbly, she was always in a good mood," said

Linda Alexander, a dietary aide. "It seems so quiet now."

"Betty's death hits OPSEU members and indeed, all Ontarians, close to home," said OPSEU president Leah Casselman. "Our thoughts are with her loved ones." ▲





Left to right: Linda Alexander and Carol Shantz from Local 275, Kim McDougall-Hodge, Local 276

Walkerton tragedy affects whole OPSEU family

A dedicated group of OPSEU members have been working tirelessly to restore clean and safe drinking water to Walkerton.

They came from across Ontario and from many workplaces: the Ontario Clean Water Agency, the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Grey Bruce Owen Sound Health Unit. Some retirees came back to help. Most volunteered, leaving their families and friends to work 12- and 14-hour days to make Walkerton's water safe.

"The team approach has been incredible," said Carl Grimstead, a compliance auditor from OCWA in London, in Walkerton since June 8.

Carl and his colleagues oversee a small army of plumbers, contractors and their own staff – all struggling to clean and disinfect the water system.

Carl says it's impossible to outline a typical day. "They are never the same and they are always full. Whenever the least little thing goes wrong, we get a call and we go out and fix it immediately," he said.

Bruce Hawkins, a surface water evaluator from MOE's London office arrived in Walkerton June 7. He co-ordinates an alternate water supply which sends water from a neighbouring town to the hospital, jail, two senior citizen residences and a public shower and washroom. He's helped by MNR workers who normally fight forest fires in the north.

OCWA and MOE staff wear special t-shirts. "You can't go into a donut shop or restaurant without people coming up and talking to you," said Bruce.

Never far from OPSEU members' minds are their colleagues back home who are picking up their assignments in workplaces that have already suffered major cutbacks.

"I am so proud of OPSEU members who have dropped everything to help the people of Walkerton," said OPSEU president Leah Casselman. "Tragedies like Walkerton underline the importance of public services. OCWA and MOE have had their staff and budgets slashed by the Harris government." ▲

OPSEU has a role in Walkerton Inquiry

OPSEU has official standing at the Walkerton Inquiry.

The Inquiry has three parts. OPSEU has different standing in each:

1. The causes of the Walkerton events apart from government practices: OPSEU can protect the interests of directly-involved members.
2. The effect, if any, of government policies,

procedures and practices: OPSEU has full standing, as part of a union group. The inquiry commissioner suggested OPSEU should take the lead for the group because of its "broad representation of provincial government employees."

3. General water safety issues: OPSEU has full standing. "Our members and staff have done a tremendous

amount of thinking, talking, researching and writing to get us to this point," said OPSEU President Leah Casselman. "The Inquiry gives us a chance to help restore accountability and safety to Ontario's drinking water system."

For more information, check the OPSEU web site at www.opseu.org or the official inquiry web site at www.walkertoninquiry.com. ▲