

# What Did We Learn From Walkerton?

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**W**hat happened in Walkerton, Ontario, in May of 2000, was life altering for many people. There were the victims, the innocent lives lost, those left with long-term illnesses, the water operators, and all other employees of the City, including the Council and Mayor, the Health Division personnel, and the EPA's counterpart.

In a town of about 4,500 people, approximately 2,400 people were attended to in the emergency room. Roughly 450 people will have long-term health affects. Seven people died. Why?

- No understanding of the “Barrier” concept
- Lack of knowledge
- Personal agendas
- Lack of integrity
- Adversary relationship with the Department of Health
- Little support from upper-management
- Financial impact
- Being unprepared to deal with emergencies

**The “Barrier” Concept:** As an operator, your main responsibility is to provide clean, safe, adequate water. The task you perform every day is one of a caretaker. You are responsible for life's most important commodity, drinking water. We cannot exist without clean water.

Before we had the understanding of “how” to protect the water, waterborne diseases were prevalent in the United States. They were the third major killer! You are the “Barrier” between these diseases caused by contaminated water and health! You do not sell water; you sell the service of keeping it safe.

**“Knowledge”:** It is important as an operator that you have a clear understanding of why you perform the tasks you do. The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) clearly defines what steps must be taken to keep the water safe. Operator certification requires you to become knowledgeable. When it is time to obtain your CEU's, choose classes that will add value to your career. Your job is too important to just pass time because you need CEU's to remain certified. Many articles on the “Walkerton Incident” discuss the operators' lack of knowledge.

**“Personal Opinion”:** In all of the accounts written about Walkerton, a common theme kept appearing - the attitudes regarding chlorination. It was thought to be too expensive, created more work, caused taste and odor complaints, etc. The lack of a consistent residual throughout

the distribution system was life-altering for too many people, including the operators! When a rule is written, research is done on both the health effects and financial impact of the regulation. It has been proven to be what is best for the population as a whole. Personal opinion about the rule must not be reflected in daily work ethics. There is too much at stake.

**“Lack of Integrity”:** Integrity is everything in your profession! Lack of integrity can lead to illness and, in some cases, death. Integrity enhances your relationship with the people you rely on for support. If the operator had answered honestly when asked if there was a problem with Walkerton's water, the outcome would have been much different.

**“Relationship with the Department of Health (DOH)”:** What is their role and have you participated in enhancing this? When there is a question or concern regarding the quality of your product or the day-to-day operation of your system, call DOH. DOH personnel spend much of their time figuring out how to assist water operators in implementing the SDWA and how to keep the water safe. Their role is not enforcement, it is support. If you cannot pick up the phone and talk with your DOH engineer, or anyone else in the department, you need to fix this! It is too important and valuable of a relationship to be clouded with conflict or misunderstanding. A phone call from the Walkerton operator to DOH's counterpart when the E. Coli showed up, may have saved lives, but reports tell us this relationship was strained. Consequently, one of the operator's main support systems did not exist.

**“Support from Upper-Management”:** In Walkerton, and in many other water systems, the relationship with upper-management and the Council, or Board of Directors, is the hardest to cultivate and maintain. In part, this is caused by the constant change in people and the regulations. These changes are accompanied by money issues taking center stage and the decision makers not truly understanding the importance of clean, safe drinking water through compliance.

If you don't have the support from upper-management, determine how to change this. Keep communicating verbally and in writing. Give them the facts and not your personal opinion or agenda. Facts may include what is required, by whom, how to implement this rule, what support is out there, including financial options, and what is the timeline.

An occasional reminder regarding their liability may be effective in getting their attention.