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Book Review/Recension

Safe Drinking Water, Lessons from Recent Outbreaks in Affluent Nations

Steve E. Hrudehy, Elizabeth J. Hrudehy. London, England: IWA Publishing, 2004; 514 pp, US\$145

Steve and Elizabeth Hrudehy are experts on the assessment and management of environmental health risks. They have assembled an excellent synopsis of drinking water outbreaks in wealthier countries.

The first three chapters of this book cover a variety of topics related to the supply of safe drinking water, including a review of the first-known drinking water outbreak reported by John Snow in London in 1854, a summary of waterborne microorganisms responsible for drinking water outbreaks, and a description of the source to tap concept to safe drinking water.

Chapter 4 is the core of the book, summarizing some 70 outbreak case studies from 14 countries spanning more than 30 years. Each case study details the drinking water system, the responsible microorganism (when known), and the circumstances leading to the outbreak. This information will be valuable to drinking water purveyors to help ensure that the same situations do not occur in their systems.

The next two chapters detail the recurring theme of the book, i.e., the necessity of “converting hindsight into foresight” to avoid future outbreaks. They describe many of the challenges facing the drinking water industry and the limitations encountered when responding to these challenges. The authors present some useful examples from jurisdictions around the world on the shift in the provision of drinking water from being reactive to a more preventive approach based on the concept of source to tap.

The final chapter emphasizes that the microbiological safety of drinking water should be the primary concern and that disinfection should never be compromised to reduce the formation of disinfection by-products. Although the book does not address chemical risks, it does recognize that under certain conditions some chemicals can pose a health risk and should be managed.

There are three take-home messages in this book. First, to avoid future outbreaks, we need to learn lessons from our past mistakes. Second, regardless of treatment technology in place, the skill of the individuals operating the technology is critical to the prevention of outbreaks. Operator training can be the difference between the successful management of a system and a serious outbreak. And third, the source to tap approach is the key to ensuring a continuous supply of safe drinking water.

The information presented in this book will benefit all those involved in the supply of safe drinking water, including plant operators, regulatory bodies, health officials, academics, consultants and many others. The authors have included an extensive list of references for those readers who are interested in exploring this topic further.

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