

We need all the facts on water

I suspect we've all had enough of the water crisis and just want to get back to our former water-care-free lives. But don't turn away now you see what I'm on about this week. As the "boil directive" fades to a memory, what better time to think about what needs to happen next?

I hate to suggest it – but there should be an official public inquiry into what happened, how the authorities handled it, and how to improve the water emergency strategy (does one exist?).

We had a lucky escape. Yes, it was a bloody nuisance having to watch what we drank, washed in, wiped the kitchen bench with, brushed our teeth in, etc, but so far as I'm aware nobody died, nobody got sick, and the only health casualties were the Waitara bloke's poor goldfish.

Remember Havelock North? I've been re-reading some of the horrific reports of what happened there in 2016 when their water was hit by a campylobacter bug. Three people were killed and 5000 came down with severe gastro-enteritis symptoms.

Former Witt journalism student Robyn McLean wrote at the time: "It started the Thursday before last with a phone call from my husband. 'I'm really sick,' he moaned. I dished out some verbal sympathy and then told him, essentially, to harden up.

"Then, just after 10am the next day, I got an email from my son's school. Kids were dropping like flies. Shortly after, I noticed Facebook was being inundated with comments from parents from different schools in Havelock North with tales of mass absentees — some in their hundreds."

She thought her son had conned her over a crook stomach a couple of days before, when she told him he could stay home - if he drank lots of water. "Now, six days later, his ribs are protruding, and he's spent hours crying, vomiting and pooping blood-laced liquid. The guilt is almost unbearable...How could this happen in 100% Pure New Zealand?"

There was an official inquiry, a big report, and we became aware New Zealand has a lot of dodgy water supplies. But not ours, surely, we would have thought when the report emerged; New Plymouth's water supply has been exemplary...surely.

So what just happened here?

Could it have been avoided, or was it a so-called "Act of God", as some are claiming? Is our water supply seriously out-dated? Have past councils failed to spend enough money keeping it up to scratch? Do we need to divert a helluva lot more towards making it better, as Neil Holdom pointed out in the last election campaign?

My particular concern is communication. Once the broken pipe was discovered, someone presumably raised the obvious question – what's got into the system to contaminate it, and how far could that spread? But it seemed to take a long time to communicate a clear message about that to all the public.

The civil defence phone alerts were erratic. Details of exactly what "boil your water" meant emerged piecemeal. Who saw to the needs of those incapable to understanding? The council letter heroically delivered to households had some precautionary advice, but not enough.

It was paradoxical that a full explanation of what might happen – in terms of bacteria and viruses being spread through the supposedly unaffected parts of the reticulation – emerged from an engineer working for South Taranaki District Council.

He's a former NPDC staffer, and runs civil defence, but it seems odd he was the one to [explain](#) the risks, to fully inform the population of technical reasons why we had to boil water. Why was *Taranaki Daily News* told by the NPDC's ever-expanding spin doctor team that the man who should have been explaining - the always helpful chief engineer David Langford - was too busy?

No doubt the council fears legal repercussions from what its staff and councillors say. Millions of dollars have been lost by businesses, and I doubt we're the only ones who ruined our kettle. Compensation might be a possibility if council incompetence could be proved.

Most important, perhaps, is the question of how well the council and the Medical Officer of Health informed us about the risks and what exactly to do about them. I suspect if there *had* been bugs in the water, many of us would still be recovering from severe stomach aches.

If an inquiry is held, it needs to be an independent, public one. The council has too much of a vested interest.
