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Digging for the Truth

Are boil-water advisories necessary?

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Earlier this year, yet another water pressure fall triggered a boil-water advisory for the entire east bank of New Orleans. These boil-water advisories are occurring with increasing frequency and are becoming old hat. State adopted drinking water regulations mandate local authorities to issue these advisories.

The theory behind these advisories appears straightforward. The soil surrounding water distribution pipes is potentially laced with disease-causing viruses, bacteria, and parasites. When pressure within a water distribution system drops, these microbes can seep into the water distribution system. Your home faucet becomes a delivery system for gastrointestinal bad guys like salmonella, parasites, and toxic strains of *E. coli*. Better boil that water.

Human disease outbreaks from intrusions of microbial contaminants following transient pressure drops within municipal water systems like ours are more theoretical than real. I once termed these concerns as nothing more than a governmental inspired urban myth. Now I gotta eat those words. A fellow physician told me about a patient who developed an illness directly attributable to the water pressure drop last January.

Mary Martinez agreed to let me tell her story. She grew up near Corpus Christi Church off St. Bernard Avenue and has lived in the 7th Ward for more years than she cares to reveal. She worked as a clerk and assembled home owner insurance policies until the Lafayette Insurance Company moved operations to Galveston in 2003. She lost her husband during Hurricane Katrina.

"Every morning I tune in WVUE Fox News. They came on saying don't bathe, brush teeth, drink with tap water. Well I wanted a bath. Who has enough bottled water for a full bath? I started boiling in two five-quart pots on the stove. After they came to a rolling boil, I carried the hot water to my bathtub in a two-quart pot. Carrying all those pots of water aggravated my knee. Dr. Gregor Hoffman said I sprained my knee carrying all those pots of water."

So now the air is clear. New Orleans has a documented medical incident directly related to a transient drop in municipal water pressure. My long-held premise that short intervals of decreased water pressure are unrelated to any disease in cities like ours was washed down the drain.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu issued his first boil-water advisory in 2010, his first year in office. He held a press conference in front of City Hall to explain the advisory. I was there. The head honcho of the S&WB described the 10-minute fall in pressure as a "catastrophic failure of all the redundant systems."

The state Office of Public Health sent their regional medical director to address any medical questions. She recommended using boiled water for showers without explaining how to get boiled water back into the s shower. She also advised boiled or bottled water for pets.

"Can you cite a single instance when a short-term loss in water pressure such as we experienced caused even a single case of human illness in the last 100 years?" I asked. Her reply: "I'll have to get back to you on that one." Well, that call back never occurred, and New

Orleans has had over a dozen more such "catastrophic failures" on Landrieu's watch since 2010.

The origin of these boil water advisories is difficult to trace. Some feckless bureaucrats hiding under the mantle of the Environmental Protection Agency apparently picked a certain pressure level and ignored any real-world scenarios. It is my understanding that the state could have adopted a more reasonable rule but accepting the EPA recommendation by default was easier than examining data from the world's scientific literature.
