

# ENSURING SAFE DRINKING WATER: LEARNING FROM FRONTLINE EXPERIENCE WITH CONTAMINATION

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In 2009, Canadian Water Network identified the challenge of providing safe drinking water as a crucial focus within the Canadian Municipal Water Consortium. An international expert panel was assembled to collaborate with a steering committee of municipal water providers and drinking water regulators. Stemming from this work, CWN published a report in 2012, titled [Managing Uncertainty in the Provision of Safe Drinking Water](#).

The report co-authors, Steve E. Hrudehy and Elizabeth J. Hrudehy, built on the early CWN-funded work and collected international case studies into their 2014 book, *Ensuring Safe Drinking Water: Learning from Frontline Experience with Contamination*. In this excerpt from the book, the Hrudeys offer ten commandments for safe drinking water.

## TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR SAFE DRINKING WATER

### 1. Never say never!

Contamination can strike any system. The test for you will be how quickly you recognize trouble and deal with it effectively.

### 2. Do not underestimate the capacity of fecal (human or animal) waste to make water unsafe.

Ample evidence proves how remarkably little fecal waste is needed to seriously contaminate drinking water.

### 3. Learn from experience - do not just survive it.

Learn from your mistakes and from those around you.

### 4. Make sure you understand why you must comply with regulated requirements.

If you only do things because you are told to, you are well on your way to complacency and worse to come.

### 5. Recognize when you do not understand what is happening.

Admit it and seek help to understand.

### 6. Treat water operations like defensive driving.

Expect mistakes by others.

### 7. Do not overlook the obvious.

If your plant is so poorly maintained or filthy that a reasonable person would not consider eating food there, you should not expect a rational person to have confidence in your ability to produce safe drinking water there.

### 8. Maintain healthy skepticism about the first explanations of what is wrong.

If things are going seriously wrong, an unfortunate coincidence involving independent but noncritical problems may lead your corrective efforts astray.

### 9. Do not let others (managers, politicians) be able to pin the blame on you.

If you know that improvements are needed, document those needs in detail and bring them to the attention of your immediate supervisor.

### 10. Take pride in the public health responsibility that you carry and maintain.

Our society generally takes drinking water for granted, but you must recognize and make sure your family and friends understand that all those involved in ensuring delivery of safe drinking water are in the front line of protecting public health.

