

# **Covering a community in crisis: Hard news and compassion in balance**

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Pat Raftis and his family arrived at their home in Harriston, Ontario, late Monday evening, May 22, 2000, tired after the drive home from a wilderness camping trip that filled the three-day Victoria Day weekend. School and work loomed ahead the next day, so the kids were hurried off to bed and the car unpacked. Raftis settled in to watch the 11 o'clock news to catch up with the world, secure in the knowledge that when he left work on Friday, 90 percent of the next week's edition of the *Walkerton Herald-Times* was ready for print. Reporter Sue Ann Ellis and Raftis, the editor, could easily put the finishing touches on the paper by their 11 a.m. deadline, and he would head for the press in nearby Durham. Weary, but relaxed, he clicked on the news. A boil-water alert issued for Walkerton, people falling ill and going to the hospital, the Office of Health puzzled as to why. "It's going to be a hell of a day tomorrow," Pat thought, heading off to bed.

Sue Ann Ellis's family spent the holiday weekend at home in Walkerton. Although her 16-year-old son was itching to go off camping with friends, Ellis was hesitant to let him go. He'd had a "bug" for the last week or so, headaches, diarrhea, etc., and had dropped eight pounds. Concerned, Ellis had taken him to the hospital the week before, and they said, "Oh, it's just got to run its course," so he rested, took over-the-counter anti-diarrheals, and drank plenty of water to replace lost fluids. Young and strong, by Sunday he had improved, and she consented to let him go camping the last night of the long weekend.

Her first hint of water problems had come not long after she left the newspaper office on Friday:

I guess initially I heard whisperings. That evening a friend called me, and said, 'Have you heard anything about the water being bad?' I said, 'No, that can't be true. I mean, it would be all over the radio if that were the case. They'd have to let people know.' And on Saturday morning I was out in the flowerbed, and an acquaintance stopped and said, 'Did you hear you're not supposed to drink the water,' and, again, I said I thought the same thing. If it were dangerous, they'd have to go door-to-door, if they had to, to let us know. And then I heard the boil-water Sunday. And, again, I adhered to it, but it didn't seem to be real urgent.

She headed in to nearby Mildmay and purchased a few jugs of water to get the family through until the boil-water order was lifted.

Tuesday morning, Raftis and Ellis headed to the newspaper, knowing that a last-minute story had to be put together on the situation with the water. While Raftis rearranged the front page to make room for the additional story, Ellis phoned Public Utilities Commissioner Stan Koebel. Koebel told her that he wasn't sure it was the water that was making people ill, but that they weren't really sure what *was* going on. "He said that as far as he knew there was nothing wrong with the water. They were still drinking it. And that was at the base of what he was telling me. That the ministry was doing tests, and they didn't have those results yet," Ellis said. It wasn't much to go on, but it was the last interview Koebel would give on the water situation. "Once the press conference was over, he just disappeared for awhile."

Struggling valiantly to make their 11 a.m. press deadline, Raftis and Ellis then contacted the Officer of Health, only to be told that no statements would be made until the press conference at 11. Improvising quickly, they left a “newshole” for an explanation of the boil-water alert. Raftis took the layouts off to the press, planning to appease the printer with the rest of the pages until Ellis could call in the front-page story shortly after the press conference.

“This is absolutely an epidemic,” Dr. Murray McQuigge told the press that morning in Walkerton. McQuigge, medical officer of health with the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound Health Unit, reported that there were nine confirmed cases of illness from *E. coli* 0157, plus 160 documented cases of diarrhea treatment and about 400 related calls to area hospitals. “It was hard to pinpoint the source, because *E. coli* comes in meat and a variety of food, too,” McQuigge offered as an explanation for the delay in issuing the alert. “We were in contact with the Walkerton PUC right off the bat. We were assured the water was secure; nevertheless we issued a boiling water advisory Sunday. ... We now know it’s contaminated.”

McQuigge went on to detail the symptoms of *E. coli* contamination – diarrhea, possibly bloody, and vomiting – and the possible effects, emphasizing kidney complications, advising that javex (bleach) be added to water used for washing and bathing. Sue Ann Ellis scribbled down the details for her story, and then... “When the words, the specific words he said, that people will die, that’s when, when my light bulb just went on. I just started [thinking], ‘Stop the press conference.’” The symptoms were all too familiar; her son’s “bug” was *E. coli*.

“My concentration kind of went [gesturing to the right] over here for a minute. It’s hard to... it was hard to keep the two separate [work and personal life] for a long time.” Her son was in school. After calling Raftis to fill him in on the immensity of the problem, Ellis hurriedly wrote the story.

Meanwhile, Raftis was fighting to keep the anxious printers at bay. The press conference hadn’t ended until about 12:30 p.m., and it had turned into a very complicated, and important, story. Ellis finished the story around 2 and sent it to the printers over the Internet connection. Raftis’s frustration, however, continued:

She was able to send it over to me, and then, because they have one really crappy computer over there, I was able to get it printed – once – and that was it. I couldn’t make it print again. I couldn’t change it, do anything. I couldn’t even get the right font! So I ended up... I had to go with what I was able to get off at that point because at this point for several hours the press operator had been hollering at me, with ‘This is costing me \$300 an hour,’ and I realized that, and, you know, I was saying, ‘I don’t really care what it costs because this is a really big deal.’ Which, of course, he couldn’t understand at that point – until later. So we went with what we were able to get out that first week. The fact that it was, in fact, E. coli, that the boil-water order had been issued. At this point, no one had died, and we just weren’t sure how incredible the story was going to be.

The presses were held up for more than three hours, backing up other weeklies waiting for their press runs. The presses are owned by Metroland Publishing, the parent company of the *Walkerton Times-Herald*, and an affiliate of *The Toronto Star*, but press charges are applied to each newspaper’s budget. Raftis vented his frustration.

When I got back, I was talking to our computer tech guy, and reaming him out over the quality of the computer over there in Durham, and that we really should have something that at least had the same power that we do and was capable of printing. And, he wasn't terribly sympathetic at the time, because nobody ever used that computer over there, and why did we need a good one. And then the next day, of course, he called, and kind of apologized, and offered to see if he couldn't help out in some way. He realized, obviously, that this was the kind of story we were trying to cover.

The story had become very personal for Ellis. She took her son back to the doctor. This time they took blood and, for several days, stool samples. It wasn't E. coli, at least not at that point in his recovery, but they found another similar bacteria. "It was the same thing. You can't take anything for it. You have to let it run its course and just pray... you know, hope it goes OK," Ellis says, her eyes welling with tears as the depth of her fear comes back to her.

Initially I was giving him anti-diarrheals, Tylenol, but the more you find out about it, they tell you don't take any diarrheals. You want it to flush the system and get out. So, I did all the wrong things until I found out. But it passed after a couple of weeks. He still has, you know, a lethargic day, but I think he's bounced back... I still worry that the time we were going through it, that wasn't the time for concern. It was like they were talking about kidney and liver problems as many years as 20 down the road. I knew if it was flushing his system, he was going to be OK, but what happens when he's 30? What happens when he's 40? ... I mean this is unprecedented. We don't know. What can this do?

The first issue was out on the stands when the first fatalities were announced. McQuigge had been right; people did die.

### **The Walkerton crisis**

In the end, seven people died, five before the next issue and two later of complications. Of the 4,900 people who live in Walkerton, 2,300 of them suffered illness caused by E. coli.

The municipal water authority, the PUC, headed by Stan Koebel, had received lab results advising that E. coli bacteria was present in the water system, but had failed to issue a boil-water alert, opting instead to try to kill the bacteria with extra chlorine, a tactic that had worked in the past. This time, it didn't work. Heavy rain and flooding may have caused such a high level of contamination in the well system serving as Walkerton's water source that the chlorine couldn't contain it. There was speculation that the E. coli originated on a nearby cattle operation, washing the bacteria downhill into the wells, carried by rainwater that could not be absorbed into the ground as quickly as it fell. There was also speculation that the chlorinating equipment was not operational. Over time, both these theories have been substantiated.

People all over Ontario reacted with outrage, and an element of fear, not only because the local water authority was aware that E. coli had turned up in previous instances and people had not been warned, but also because the Ontario provincial utilities commission had been notified, and did not insist that the system be improved

and that people be warned. In response, the Province of Ontario launched a massive inquiry into the situation, and public hearings, which began in June 2000, continuing into the spring of 2002. The final reports were published in May and June of 2002.

The Walkerton Inquiry has called into question government oversight of public water safety on all levels. Much of the criticism has been leveled at Ontario Premier Mike Harris's government policies, which critics charge did not recognize the importance of public health and environmental concerns and had reduced the Province of Ontario's role in overseeing public water safety. Less devastating incidents in other Canadian towns, including nearby Collingwood, Ontario, have moved the Walkerton story into the forefront of Canadian national consciousness. If government policies were a contributing factor and facts were hidden from the public, people felt they were at risk. Could it happen again? Why not.

The municipal water in Walkerton was finally approved for drinking on December 5, 2000. People were slow to feel that they could use it for washing without adding bleach, and many are still hesitant to drink it straight from the faucet. "The Walkerton water crisis" is a title used in the *Walkerton Herald-Times* and other Canadian newspapers to describe what has been an ongoing situation and a pervasive news story, due to the lengthiness of the public inquiry and lingering fears of further health problems. The seven deaths and widespread illness brought public attention, but the regional, national, and international media didn't descend full force upon the remote town of Walkerton until it appeared that a government cover-up was involved.

### **Covering the community**

That first issue of the Walkerton water crisis hit the stands on Tuesday with the hard-earned press conference reportage on the front page. The first person to die from E. coli had already lost her fight with the bacteria on Monday, but that fact had not yet been released. As the paper was coming out on Tuesday, E. coli claimed another victim, a child. The timing of that first edition, and the information that didn't make the deadline, still bothers Editor Pat Raftis.

In retrospect, I would like to have had more that first week. Instead of doing what we did, I might have, should have maybe, held the press up until midnight and investigated some more... Because by the time I got back from putting out the paper, you know, I started to get the information that, yes, people were probably going to die from this. I would like to have had that in that first edition when it hit the streets.

It's hard to say if it would have made any real difference because immediately after that you had such national media focus that there was nothing you could tell people about the essential situation that they weren't getting somewhere. So, would it have made a lot of difference to have more information? I don't know. I just felt as though we were incomplete, and functioning on, you know, less than we could have been because we didn't have the resources in place to even e-mail a story over and get it printed off properly.

The front page of the May 31 issue, the second edition of water crisis information, carried the banner headline, "Killer bacteria strikes town," and the headline of the main story read, "Five lose lives to E. coli." Other front page stories

discussed the closing of the five Walkerton schools, and an article warning the citizens that filtering the water would not kill E. coli, that the water had to be boiled to be safe for drinking and bleach added for hand washing.

The bacteria attacked the young and the old most ferociously, and the five deaths proved out what Dr. McQuigge had said about the increased risk to those age groups. The first person to die, however, was a woman in her mid-40s, the youngest of the relatively older victims. Her death occurred on Monday, May 22, the day before the press conference, but at the time of the announcement it had not yet been attributed to E. coli bacteria. On Tuesday, as the *Walkerton Herald-Times* was published and distributed with the initial announcement, a 2-year-old girl from a nearby town died, the victim of a small glass of water in a Walkerton restaurant the week before. Three elderly residents fell victim in rapid succession on Wednesday. The five deaths were reported, but none of the dead were identified by name in the May 31 issue of the *Walkerton Herald-Times*.

Raftis had made a conscious decision not to use the names of the deceased, even though he knew their identities. “It was a decision to be sensitive, and I guess that’s part of how we would have handled things differently from the outside media. That would have brought so much more attention on these families, to be named if they didn’t want to be named or didn’t come forward, that we didn’t feel it was right to do,” Pat explained. “It didn’t seem appropriate at the time. ... We were being constantly besieged by the outside media as to who was dead, ‘Can you tell me which families are

involved,' and all that. I didn't think there was any need to subject people to that kind of attention."

The *Toronto Star*, however, once they finally uncovered the names did print them. Since that daily is affiliated through common ownership with the *Walkerton Herald-Times*, Raftis discussed his reaction to their coverage.

I was not upset ... because I know how they deal with stories. From a distance, you're able to deal with things a little more detached and a little more objectively, just like I mentioned earlier that I am able to do that on some issues here in this town [because he lives in Harriston rather than in Walkerton]. I just felt it was too close here to make an issue of a litany of the dead. It just didn't seem to be in good taste. It didn't seem fair to the families. And those were the main reasons.

Getting out the first issue, in spite of an on-deadline press conference and irate pressmen, paled in comparison to production of the May 31 issue. Short-staffed at the time, the *Walkerton Herald-Times* office consisted of one person in advertising, one in production, one in the front office, Raftis and Ellis reporting, and a student intern. "She got quite a baptism by fire ... as everybody did," Raftis commented. Readers stopped by the office for the latest information or just to talk, advertisers appeared out of nowhere placing, or attempting to place as many were screened out, advertisements for products claimed to purify water, for attorneys looking for "injured party" clients, for bottled water, etc. The endless parade of people was not only distracting, but many of

those on their doorstep presented the staff with situations that required some ethical soul-searching.

We started getting all these advertisers, lawyers, the people selling water filters, and that sort of thing, and water, too. And we said, 'Wait a minute.' You had to think about the implications of this. Do we want an ad that tells people these water filters kill E. coli, and what kind of position does that put you in, or put the public in?

Even in a normal time, if you sent me an ad that said this will kill this bacteria or this bacteria... I didn't want anybody to take and put a filter on their machine... you'd wonder that anyone would, but if someone put a filter on their tap and drank out of it, you didn't want to be responsible for that sort of thing happening. It got to the point where people were sending me all these letters for things, like home remedies, cayenne pepper.

This woman from Florida called and was absolutely insistent that I run this letter, because 'Nobody needs to die. Nobody needs to get sick any more. Just run this.' I said, 'I'm sorry, lady, I just don't have time to look into the merits of every possible thing, and I'm simply not running any of this information. Well, darned if that woman... I was thinking that was the end of it. I didn't run her letter. Months later, when this public inquiry started, when they were looking for people and had hearings for people with standing, I walked in the door and here was this cayenne pepper lady from Florida. And she had come to tell me that she was applying for standing at this hearing. She didn't get it, but she came to tell me that she forgave me for not running that information and absolved me from my responsibility in the whole thing. Strange.

While the front office and advertising staffs were dealing with the increased volume of reader and advertiser traffic, the newspaper office was also being besieged

by fellow members of the media looking for information. Raftis laughingly recalls, “Oddly enough, I stopped taking calls from the media!”

It did seem bizarre, but I had to tell the girl out front, ‘I’m not taking any more calls from the media, because I simply – not out of any desire to keep anything from anybody – just, ‘I don’t have time to deal with you guys. You’ve got seven people in town. I don’t have seven people on staff!’ You know — I’m busy!

So we also were starting to be pressed for information from them. As far as a request for information from them, if they wanted to see a particular article that we could easily lay our hands on and give them a photocopy of, we’d do that. If they wanted to go through our files – no. If they wanted us to look up everybody who died in the last three months, or something like that – no. We did help wherever we could with very simple requests. The big [issue], I think, was to cover the story here the best we could ourselves, and not worry too much about other media.

The other media, however, were not about to leave them alone. New in town, they turned to the one medium that had the background and contacts that they lacked. Once the area, national, and some international media showed up in Walkerton, the *Walkerton Herald-Times* office became not only a newspaper, but a news source, or at the very least, a potential news source. And the office staff and reporter Sue Ann Ellis referred the requests on to the editor. Raftis became a bit frustrated with the media’s persistence.

[The media wanted] interviews, or background, or we had people wanting to go through our files. We had people wanting to know if we had pictures of Stan Koebel. I was actually offered about a hundred bucks from a crime reporter from

Ottawa if I could scare them up pictures of the Koebel brothers, Stan and his brother Frank, who also works for the PUC.

Raftis was consistent in his praise of the small staff of the *Walkerton Herald-Times* and crediting them for the high quality of the community newspaper's coverage:

Well, I think the fact that we have very professional people, the people that we do have, and they're also very emotionally involved in both the paper that they're putting out and the community. And, certainly, they felt that they had to do whatever it took to get out what information we could to people. And, so, there was no question of, 'Listen, you're going to have to work late,' or whatever. Everybody just stayed until whatever had to be done was done.

With all the interruptions, even after Raftis stopped taking media calls, the sheer volume of reporting and writing presented a challenge for both Raftis and Ellis. Raftis described the week leading up to the second "crisis" issue as a blur of working until 7 or 8 at night, and then continuing the writing at home, and then a full weekend of work either at the office or at home.

By Sunday night I had just come here to the office and sat here writing things and scanning pictures, and I was here until like 2 o'clock in the morning or something, and that was Sunday night. And that was to get ready for Monday, which is the production day. I'd say, I was here about that long that night as well.

Sue Ann Ellis was also working long hours that week, and the two managed to fill the 24 pages of the second edition with editorial nearly entirely devoted to various

aspects of the crisis. Ellis had the added problem of her son's illness and concern for the rest of the family, who had been exposed to the contaminated water as well. One of the women who died had been a colleague of her husband and an acquaintance of both, and her own 4-year-old niece had been sent to a hospital in London, Ontario. "It got a little overbearing for awhile there. But not too bad. I think Pat did the bulk of it – I think because he knew how worried I was. I was struggling with things at home, and so he picked up a lot of the slack."

Raftis comments on the emotional pressure the entire newspaper staff felt as they put out that second issue, Sue Ann Ellis, particularly.

It was, you know, a factor. It was there, but that was a case where you just kind of kept going, and to a certain extent tried to detach yourself enough to just say, 'Well, this is what we've got to do.' Certainly Sue Ann was struggling under the fact that her son was sick. That had put pressure on her that I can't imagine, because even though he was doing quite well, there was all this information coming out that talked of long-term implications.

Fortunately, the *Walkerton Herald-Times* staff members were all spared illness. And the newspaper itself had a water cooler because some of the staff didn't like the taste of Walkerton's tap water. Pat said the pervasiveness of the situation did tend to make one a little paranoid. He developed several symptoms that resembled symptoms of E. coli. "I actually went to the doctor, something I haven't done in a lot of years," he said laughing. "Certainly that sort of thing scares you. You stop and think, if I've got, if I'm carrying anything at all, I'm going home to my kids."

That kind of anxiety spread throughout the town and the region. Residents and visitors to Walkerton wanted to know what precautions they should take at home and what steps were being taken in the community. They needed to know how they should react to symptoms, if it was safe to eat in restaurants, if it was possible to spread E. coli through contact or if a person had to drink affected water to be endangered. Residents of neighboring towns were wary as well, a feeling compounded by the fact that one of the early victims had been a 2-year-old from another town. Raftis said that rumors circulated in Walkerton about reactions in the nearby towns.

There were certainly stories going on that there were signs up in businesses in neighboring towns asking people from Walkerton not to, you know, handle the groceries. These were the stories you heard. Whether there was or not, I don't know, but you heard it from enough sources. And, even now... I live a couple towns down. My son's hockey team is coming up to play here this weekend, and one of the parents on the team says, "Well, I know we can take our own water, but, I mean, should we even be in the change rooms."

The second edition after the crisis began came out Wednesday, May 31, 2000, and by then the *Walkerton Herald-Times* knew that they had to do more than report the hard news and information coming out about the water crisis, who was to blame and how did it happen. The people passing through their office were afraid, and the local newspaper had to provide community safety information to assist people in recognizing symptoms and keeping their families away from any further contact with the contamination. One headline announced, "Boil water, filters won't work," a

response to the idea that water filtration systems were sufficient protection. The article included advice from the Medical Officer of Health to boil water, wash clothing, and use water mixed with chlorine bleach to wash hands. Residents were advised to discard any cartridge or faucet filtration systems. Readers were told that the virus didn't live well outside of the body, a vital piece of reassurance for nervous residents.

Another article detailed the progression of the E. coli virus from mild reactions to severe, from diarrhea and stomach cramps to Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome, which causes kidney failure and death. Preventive information was included in this article, including the fact that E. coli lives in ice and that residents not only had to discard any foods or beverages that had been in contact with water but also any ice. In an attempt to dispel some of the rumors that were circulating, the article quoted Medical Officer Dr. Murray McQuigge, "E. coli does not survive in the air, on surfaces like tables or counters and is not spread by coughing, kissing, or sexual intercourse." Another article bore the headline, "Walkerton people not contagious, says McQuigge."

By this time the town was on full alert. The May 31 edition announced that five people had lost their lives, that the schools remained closed, and that lawsuits were already underway. Government officials were dodging accusations artfully, and those accusations were flowing freely. Ontario Premier Mike Harris earnestly pledged to "get to the bottom of the tragedy." Editorials and columns dealt solely with the crisis; there were no other stories to compete with this one. Walkerton was immersed in crisis, and the newspaper provided them with the information they so desperately needed.

The human side of the tragedy was not lost in the barrage of facts and accusations. Reporter Sue Ann Ellis managed to squeeze in time to put together a feature on a recovering child and his very shaken and angry mother, with interviews with a number of other stricken families. Parents expressed their confusion and anger, particularly that the information wasn't given out earlier. "When you have a chlorinator not working properly, a bad storm and the detection of E. coli... why not tell people. I'm not angry that it happened. I'm angry that people weren't told sooner," said Bill Kueneman.

Others weren't as kind to their public officials. They were very outraged that it had happened, and wanted to know why it happened and where to lay the blame. Even this early in the crisis, it was clear that the system had failed, and fingers were pointed at officials from the local water system to the Ontario municipal government. The township of Brockton brought in a media relations expert to handle the heavy demand for information from the public and the media.

While many people were angry, this issue also contained information about how people could react constructively. Funds for medical expenses for victims were set up, and a telethon had been put together to raise money for the local hospitals. Bottled water was being distributed, most of it free, since supply in area stores had long since been exhausted, and water trucks from neighboring towns came in to help in the crisis. Pat Raftis was quick to add that while there were negative rumors floating about in nearby towns, there was also great support coming from those towns, particularly in donations of water and financial assistance.

The media itself came under attack in this issue. Columnist John Finlay wrote about a media “feeding frenzy,” describing the actions of the media at a press conference as a “modern day version of a mass of piranhas in action.” He went on to detail the movement of reporters and cameras, and their demanding and competitive attitudes and questions. It was very clear that the *Walkerton Herald-Times* was not included in his vitriol against the media. In fact, the people this researcher approached in Walkerton did not lump “our newspaper” in with “the media,” and for the *Walkerton Herald-Times* this was a positive thing. Locals made no secret of how intrusive and frustrating it was to be the focus of outside media attention. The office manager of the Chamber of Commerce, Karen Harper, commented that the local newspaper had done a good job in covering the crisis, but then she went into great detail about how annoying it was to have clusters of media personnel out on the street so much of the time, all of them trying to get interviews with people passing by. Even her children were glad to see the media leave town. Raftis suggested that part of the problem was that outside media had nowhere to go except their motels or the street, and theorized that prior knowledge of the community enabled them to cover the information without becoming ubiquitous.

People were quite apologetic if they couldn't tell us something, or wouldn't, whereas they were much more abrupt with the others. Certainly the people were much more comfortable talking to us than they were to some of the other media. I recall listening to one of the girls from CATV saying, “Everywhere we go we are getting called [expletive deleted] vultures.” ... Some of the stuff you already knew. They had to come in and find the basic information about the people in

the town. ... They were everywhere, literally. ... this guy with a camera at the hotel, he was just sitting on the roof. He was on top of the hotel. There was nothing going on there. He was just taking shots of the street. You know, it was just so bizarre to see some guy filming from up there, from everywhere.

What often set the *Walkerton Herald-Times* coverage apart from other media coverage, other than providing information that only local residents needed and not annoying them in the process, was that both Raftis and Ellis were committed to covering the news of the crisis in a sensitive manner. Each, in separate interviews, spoke of the pain of those who lived in the community and being careful not to add to that pain. This was particularly clear when Raftis spoke about the seven victims. Even in our interviews, he never named the people who died, and, until they became public knowledge during the Walkerton Inquiry, he never named them in print either.

Raftis also refused to be the conduit for the other media to learn the names of the victims. "I don't know how many times I had calls from outside media saying can you give me the list of all the people that have died." Of course, eventually, the outside media did find out who the victims were, either because lawsuits were filed or because it came out in the beginning of the Inquiry. Eventually, some of the names were also printed in the *Walkerton Herald-Times*, but Raftis felt that was more appropriate after the families had been able to grieve more privately.

This sensitivity was also extended to the farmer whose farm has been identified as the probable source of the E.coli contamination. A shallow well, a higher elevation cattle field, and flooding conditions brought this local veterinarian and cattle farmer

into the limelight in a particularly surprising and tragic way. Early on, a reporter from the outside media interviewed him and then reported that his farm was the source of the E. coli. Raftis did use Beisenthal's name after an interview. "At that point I used that name because I talked to Dr. Beisenthal and so it was all part of the story. His name was out there, and I certainly needed to get his reaction to what would happen in that case." Dr. Beisenthal defended his farming practices and explained that his farm had been there long before the well was placed and that the town should have taken precautions. Raftis also allowed him space to express his grief over the loss of lives and the illness caused by the contamination.

### **And the story continues**

After the first two issues, after the outside media has dropped regular coverage of the Walkerton water crisis, although the Inquiry did attract national attention, the coverage of its aftermath continues in Walkerton. When interviewed in November 2000, Pat Raftis was deep into coverage of the Inquiry. It was still front-page news every week, but at last there were other stories to compete with it occasionally. Raftis spoke about the ubiquitous nature of the water crisis:

Sometimes it feels as though it is the only one [story]. Certainly, we have a lot of water stuff going, but we've got elections going on and certainly people are still winning awards and presenting checks, and doing all those things that they do in a community, and, that was something we had to make sure of, that we kept enough balance to cover just the normal activities. You know, it skews your whole news judgment as to what's important. I mean, about two or three weeks

into this they had a bomb scare that cleared out the entire municipal building and the surrounding block, and I put that on page three!

After a complete sanitizing, not only of the water system and mains, but also of each home's water system, the water was finally declared to be safe to drink in early December of 2000. Whether people were rushing to test the safety of the water was another issue. A number of residents, in print and in conversation, felt that it would be a very long time before they would trust the water to drink, but most were relieved to be able to bathe and wash dishes and clothing without adding bleach. The water became the overriding issue during that fall's local elections, and it will likely be the safest water in the province of Ontario with so much local attention focused on it. Raftis described the current water system as "state of the art."

The *Walkerton Herald-Times* coverage has chronicled both the pain and the slow, arduous, and continuing healing of a community. Their readers have experienced sorrow, anger, finger-pointing, admission of blame, and endless discussion of the issues leading to the water crisis. Those experiences were documented weekly on the pages of their community newspaper, or "our paper" as Walkerton residents would say.

Two further questions remained to be asked of the editor of the *Walkerton Herald-Times*. The first had to do with news coverage of municipal water. In their coverage of the town board, was there any inkling of problems in the water system? Had there been equipment purchase requests that were denied? Or perhaps water tests that were discussed at the town meetings. Was there anything that a reporter could pick up on

that would suggest that water safety was in jeopardy? Raftis felt there were no suggestions of problems within the water department.

Never was there any apparent panic about the quality of water here. The only thing that really ever came up was that years ago, when the province was cutting back on their enforcement and downloaded some of their responsibilities down as far as the Council. The Council passed a resolution asking that the province maintain its role as the guardian of water quality, but they weren't even talking about local water quality as they were about water quality in general. ... They were saying that if we have a problem here they wanted the province to maintain the role in funding and monitoring water quality, which the province backed away from for several years.

One question remained. How has covering this crisis, with all its heartache and difficulties, changed the *Walkerton Herald-Times*? In an earlier interview, Pat Raftis responded quickly that he didn't think the paper had really changed too much. In our last interview, he asked to address the question again.

I think I said mostly that I don't know that it has [changed the newspaper], in that we always pursued the hard news hard and covered the other parts of the community news in as much depth as we could. But it has changed us in a lot of ways ... the paper's taken on a much more serious tone, and you feel a lot more responsibility to be providing information about this issue because it's so vital an issue in their lives, so you daresn't be wrong and you daresn't be incomplete, and, not that you should ever be, but it becomes incredibly critical. And this issue does dominate the paper. I mean it's every week at least 50 to 75 percent of the hard news stories have some water angle. Even though, the editorial page, I used to really write editorials, like anyone does, thou shalt not do this kind of

thing, but my columns were more of a Dave Barry kind of thing. But since last May, I haven't written a single thing that was even mildly amusing. It just didn't seem ... things just don't strike you as funny anymore. The workings of government, and the story of things you often parody, that doesn't seem funny. If it's changed us, I suppose that's how. And we still have our fun here, but everything you do here seems so important. It's eye opening.

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