

# I Helped Expose the Lead Crisis in Flint. Here's What Other Cities Should Do.

The fight against lead in water is a fight for our kids.

By **Mona Hanna-Attisha**

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Aug. 27, 2019

Four years ago, with my white coat on, I stepped out of my pediatric clinic and held a news conference. Lifting a baby bottle filled with water from Flint, Mich., I shared my research: Lead was increasingly in the blood of Flint’s children. The powers-that-be tried to silence me initially, but persistence, activism, teamwork and science prevailed. Since then, Flint has been on a slow but sure path toward recovery.

Flint is an extreme case but not unique. A troubling number of cities across the country — Pittsburgh, Chicago, Portland, Ore. — are struggling with elevated lead in their drinking water. It’s one of the legacies of the profit-driven and largely unaccountable lead industry that thwarted science, fought regulations and forced its use in our gasoline, paint and plumbing.

Now Newark, a city with three times the population of Flint, is facing a similar problem of lead in its drinking water. Because of weak sampling requirements in the federal Lead and Copper Rule, we may never know when Newark’s corrosion control treatment started to fail, but data showing lead was present in drinking water first appeared in 2016 — and that in itself is troubling.

Newark’s water samples reveal lead levels that aren’t “borderline” numbers or wait-and-see numbers. The amount of lead in Newark’s water is among the highest of any municipal system of its size across the country. Some levels in the city are in the hundreds of parts per billion. And now there is a concern that the lead-clearing filters are not working as well as they should.

What can Newark citizens expect? If they’ve paid attention to drinking-water crises of the past 20 years in our country, they’ll see politicians who are in denial, utilities that don’t want to be held accountable, health officials who demand “proof of harm” before taking action and victims who are dismissed and even blamed.

The most telling example of what can go wrong — desperately wrong — can be learned from taking a close look at the Washington water crisis in the nation’s capital.

And you thought I’d be telling you all about Flint, right?

There was a water crisis in Washington in the early 2000s, the kind of public health tragedy that government regulations are meant to protect us from. And it occurred right under the noses of our most powerful institutions. Unless that piece of history becomes more well known, and studied, it will continue to repeat itself.

I hadn’t been schooled in the Washington crisis, either, until my high school friend Elin Betanzo, a drinking-water expert who worked at the Environmental Protection Agency, came to a barbecue at my house and asked me about the water in Flint, where I work as a pediatrician at a children’s public clinic.

“The authorities say the water is fine,” I said to Elin.

That was in August 2015. I’d been hearing about problems with the drinking water in Flint for months. There were reports about its weird color, odor and taste — followed by bacteria and boil-water advisories. But officials kept saying everything was fine. And I believed them. At the clinic, with great confidence I told the parents of my patients that the drinking water was good enough for their kids to drink.

“It’s not fine,” Elin replied with a look of urgency on her face. “When you change the source of water or how it’s treated, it changes the way the water reacts with the pipes. That’s what we learned from the Washington water crisis. There was lead in the Washington tap water and it took years for anyone in charge to recognize it, let alone fix it.”

Lead in the Washington water? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “How could something like that take years to address?”

As a pediatrician, I know lead is the worst kind of poison. Permanent. Life-altering. A neurotoxin, lead can have serious consequences on the developing brain. For decades, levels that the lead industry wanted us to believe are O.K. we know now are not. There is no safe level of lead exposure for a child.

“Scientists and activists in D.C. tried to be heard — and were ignored,” Elin said angrily. “Lead was in the D.C. water for years. More lead than you could imagine. More lead than I want to think about.”

That night, I got very little sleep. In bed with my laptop open, I pored over news accounts of the Washington crisis. They were online and easy to find.

I learned that after the water treatment in Washington was changed in 2000, authorities did routine sampling and test results showed high concentrations of lead in the public drinking water. As in Newark and Flint, the public was never notified. Even the city government wasn’t told.

For the next four years, toxic levels of lead flowed freely and in heavy amounts in all four quadrants of the District — from Georgetown and Spring Valley to the farthest reaches of Georgia Avenue and Anacostia. It affected infants, children and adults; rich, poor and gentrified; working, middle and upper class; white and black.

There could be as many as 42,000 children in Washington who were in the womb or under 2 years of age when they were exposed, children who may have experienced inexplicable developmental delays, behavioral problems, low test scores and blunted potential from the impact of lead in their drinking water. Nothing was done for them.

Nothing was done about the biggest villains in the Washington water crisis, either. All of them escaped conviction or consequences. Nobody went to jail. Nobody lost their job. Many were promoted.

It was weeks before I got a good night’s sleep again. Knowing such lies were possible while children were being poisoned kept me awake at night — and motivated me each day in Flint. What I learned about the Washington crisis — how much lead was in the water, what it took to expose the truth — made me determined the same thing wouldn’t happen to Flint kids.

What keeps me awake now?

Newark.

This summer, when I met with the brave activists in Newark, I heard the same searing questions I heard in Flint: “Will my baby be O.K.?” and “How could this happen?”

Flint and Washington and Newark are all viewed as black cities and have a shared history of segregation, redlining, race riots, white flight, economic decline, violence, a pernicious drug epidemic and a loss of local control. Newark’s water crisis, like Flint’s and even Washington’s, is an obvious case of environmental racism, a case of blindness to the people, places and problems we choose not to see.

If we stop believing that the government can protect us and keep all children safe, not just the privileged ones, what do we have left? Who are we as a country?

Studying the Washington crisis is what drove many of us in Flint to do better. We knew that we needed to get an emergency declared, water and filters distributed along with pre-mixed formula for infants, and all the lead pipes replaced. Knowing the Washington water crisis history led us to fight for accountability and for long-term resources and interventions to preserve the promise of Flint children.

So that’s the history lesson that I want to pass on to Newark. Stay woke and keep fighting. Our public health protections fundamentally tell us how much or little we value our children. Beyond drinking water, the stories of Flint and Washington also shed light on the deteriorating infrastructure and environmental injustice in our cities. It’s not enough to be aware of injustice; we

need to take action — even when it’s hard or scary or may seem impossible. And especially when everyone else wants you to stay silent.

And that gives Newark, and the rest of the nation, an opportunity to write an even better story, one governed by transparency, equity, science, prevention and centered around our most valuable resource: our children.

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A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 27, 2019, Section A, Page 23 of the New York edition with the headline: What D.C.’s Lead Crisis Can Teach Other Cities

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