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Water, canoes and Johannesburg

This summer, while European cities were sandbagged against floods and Alberta farms were devastated by drought, political leaders prepared to address the world's water supply as a crucial theme of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. Safe and adequate drinking water (in other words, water that doesn't require women and girls to expend more than a third of their daily energy intake hauling it) is unavailable to almost one-sixth of the world's population: about 1.2 billion people. Every year, 2 million children (6000 per day) die from diarrheal illnesses related to unclean water and poor sanitation.¹ Despite some progress in clean water access in the last decade, the combined effects of population growth, diversion of water for industrial uses, inefficient irrigation and groundwater contamination mean that two-thirds of the world's population will live with water shortages by 2025.²

Inadequate access to clean water is difficult to visualize as a Canadian problem: over 7.6% of the country is covered by lakes and rivers. Although we represent less than 1% of the world's population we are stewards of 7% of its renewable freshwater supply. With so much water, we've learned to disregard its worth, consuming over 1000 gallons per day per capita — almost the highest usage rate of any country in the world and over 3 times that of Norway.³

Our profligate use of water in North America is depleting aquifers 3 times faster than they are being replenished. And there is prodigious waste in another sense: only 57% of Canadian sewage is treated.⁴ Moreover, the state of our water supply reflects deeply rooted social disparities even in this land of abundance: in 1995, Health Canada reported that 25% of Aboriginal communities surveyed had a potentially unsafe water supply.⁵

Environment Minister David Ander-

son announced in Johannesburg that Canada would contribute an additional \$5.7 million to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and \$1.5 million to an Ontario facility participating in the UNEP's water monitoring program. These are small drops in a leaking bucket: the global investment needed for water and sanitation is estimated at US\$23 billion a year.² At home we need a better grasp of how our domestic, agricultural and industrial behaviours are affecting the water supply, the long-term impact of bulk water exports, and the condition of our major aquifers. We need to reduce consumption to more reasonable levels. Our most conspicuous form of water-awareness has been to bottle the stuff, transforming a staple of human life into a luxury good.

Not long ago a friend of ours, leaving hospital with a new baby, was given a packet of helpful information and a screwdriver (to turn down the thermostat on her hot water tank). A worthy gift, she felt — adding that a more far-sighted plan would be to give each newborn Canadian a canoe. Perhaps then the next generation would have more reverence for the abundance and purity of our water supply. —CMAJ

References

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