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Emergency declaration would have helped in gastro outbreak, report finds

MARTY SHARPE Last updated 17:12 25/01/2017
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Brookvale Rd bore No 1, near Havelock North. This is one of the bores at the centre of an investigation into how the town's water supply became contaminated.

Public alerts about the Havelock North gastro outbreak might have been more effective if a state of emergency had been declared, a review has found.

The review, obtained by Stuff, was compiled by former national director of Civil Defence John Hamilton, and focused on the response by Hastings District Council.

It will form part of the evidence put before the Government inquiry into the outbreak that affected more than 5000 residents after campylobacter was discovered in the Havelock North bores.

By the afternoon of Friday, August 12, it became clear to the council and the Hawke's Bay District Health Board that they were dealing with a waterborne organism in the water supply.

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The council responded by chlorinating the water supply from 5pm. At 6.30pm the council and DHB made the situation public and told residents they should boil their drinking water. They did this through social media posts and releases to TV, radio and newspapers.

Hamilton acknowledged that getting messages out to the public on Friday evening was a challenge, calling it a "tyranny of timing".

He said the Health Ministry suggested the use of mailbox leaflet drops, but this was ruled out due to "drafting, printing and distributing the required quantity at that time".

Door knocking would have been a challenge, given the limited time to muster volunteers and brief them, and using a mobile public alarm was considered but ruled out, as it might have cause "unnecessary alarm", Hamilton said.

Hamilton said the boil-water notice "had a very local focus and was probably not considered sufficiently newsworthy to have it broadcast as 'breaking news' by national broadcasters".

He believed the situation met the criteria for a local emergency, given that it involved the disruption of an essential lifeline utility, causing illness and distress and endangering the safety of residents, and requiring a coordinated response.

For such a declaration to be of any value, it would have to have been made on Saturday morning. But the "slow onset" nature of the emergency meant the council considered the situation to be in hand, and that a declaration was not required

"A declaration might have provided added impetus to the response messages and ramped up providing welfare support," Hamilton said.

The council did not activate its Emergency Operations Centre until Monday, August 15, and "with the benefit hindsight" this could have been activated earlier, he said.

It would have widened the focus more quickly, and would have demonstrated to staff, media, the public and others that the council "considered the issue to be serious and all resources were being used to manage it".

Hamilton tempered this by saying the decision to activate the EOC "requires information and judgment, and it is a tough call".

He noted the council's incident controller had about six months' experience at the council, and "felt ill-prepared for the role because of inadequate training and familiarisation, and insufficient guidance".


This probably contributed to tensions around how welfare support was provided.

The inquiry into what caused the outbreak begins in Hastings District Court on Monday.

Council chief executive Ross McLeod said the report had been commissioned by the council for the inquiry.

"The report recognised the overall effectiveness of council's response, but identifies a number of areas for improvement which council will build into its response planning."

- Stuff



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