

HAWKE'S BAY TODAY | Opinion

# Editorial: What lessons can we take from the gastro crisis?

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Hawkes Bay Today

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Access to clean drinking water is a basic right.

Most of us have taken it for granted most of our lives. We expect to be able to turn on the tap and have pure, drinkable water flow out.

That was until today exactly one year ago when a gastro crisis hit Havelock North, laying low more than 5000 people, sending about 45 to hospital and having possible links to three deaths.

It was the largest waterborne contamination in New Zealand's history. In today's paper, we have dedicated five pages to the event.

It was something that shook the community and, unlike a natural disaster, started slowly and just seemed to get worse and worse.

Schools started seeing more and more children off sick, pharmacies were busy and the hospital's emergency department was full.

I don't say this lightly because human life was lost, but probably the only positive thing

to come out of this dark time in our region's history were the lessons and we still have to establish fully what we have actually learnt.

Maybe we were all a little naive to think that we could sink holes in the ground and drink the water that came out without checking first that it was safe and clean.

There has been much finger-pointing and plenty of ducking for cover and there is still some disquiet over how things were handled.

The government-appointed inquiry into the disaster is into the next phase of its work, having, in that uniquely inquiry-like way, blamed the local councils concerned without actually blaming them.

Their failings could have prevented it from happening, but they were not to blame.

While there are many people who think there should be accountability, others just want a clear set of guidelines and rules to ensure it does not happen again.

The Waimarama fires earlier this year showed that at least the Hastings District Council had learned something about reacting quickly. A state of emergency was declared in no time.

I do believe our government agencies and councils are working together as a result of the crisis, but more can be done.

Those who lived through the hell of the crisis, and in some cases are still suffering, will never forget, but hopefully we can be assured that everything is being done to ensure it will never happen again.