



Turning on the Tap for Global Safe Drinking Water

By John Sauer, Water Advocates

You can scarcely enter a city park in the United States at this time of year without coming upon masses of walkers for AIDS, cyclists for leukemia, or runners for breast cancer, not to mention lines of eager volunteers keeping these weekend athletes plied with cups of water. While the need for improved research and treatment for all three diseases continues, there's no debate that awareness of the need has multiplied exponentially in recent decades.

But take another moment to think about those cups of water. In this country, we rarely give a moment's thought to the ease with which we push a button at a drinking fountain, hold a glass to a front-of-the-fridge water dispenser, or grab a bottle of water to drink on the run. We take our access to clean, fresh drinking water for granted, but in many parts of the world people fall victim to a whole host of life-threatening conditions merely for lack of access to a safe supply of drinking water and adequate sanitation.

Experts predict that between 34 million and as many as 135 million people will die by the year 2020 of water- and sanitation-related illnesses if we fail to take concrete action now. The knowledge that preventing

diarrhea, the most deadly of these illnesses, would save millions of lives should be motivation enough to take action; the further knowledge that adequate water and sanitation is the necessary foundation for much-needed commerce and development in countries where such diseases are most prevalent makes taking action now imperative.

Why does the quest for improving water and sanitation around the world elude us even though the solutions exist? The reasons are varied. For some of us, discussions of issues related to personal hygiene make us squeamish. For many—while we are likely to be acquainted with people directly touched by breast cancer or AIDS—the chances of knowing someone personally who has suffered from a sanitation-related disease are quite slim.

Fortunately, Americans working to ensure that U.S. communities have safe drinking water have long understood the depth of this crisis and have championed the call to action. Individuals from the American Water Works Association started Water For People (www.waterforpeople.org). The Philadelphia Global Water Initiative (www.pgwi.net) includes members of the Philadelphia Water Department. The International Rural Water Association's mission is to improve the quality of water and

health for people in developing countries (www.ruralwater.org/irwa). These and other efforts by the U.S. drinking water community have made a tremendous difference.

Imagine the impact on this devastating global health problem if every local water department across the country created its own global water initiative or adopted a clean drinking water and sanitation project in a sister community in Africa, Latin America or Asia. Not only would countless lives be saved, but it would also encourage leaders from other industries to take action, creating even greater momentum to solve this problem.

Over a billion people still lack access to a sustainable and affordable source of safe drinking water. Over two and a half billion people lack access to adequate sanitation. Water- and sanitation- related diseases kill up to five million people each year and sicken billions.

The time for discussion of water and sanitation in the boardrooms, in the halls of Congress, on the evening news, and beyond is now. Clean water needs its own colored ribbon attached to the lapels of the average commuter and the banner hanging from the goal posts on your neighborhood high school soccer field will hopefully soon promote a "6K for

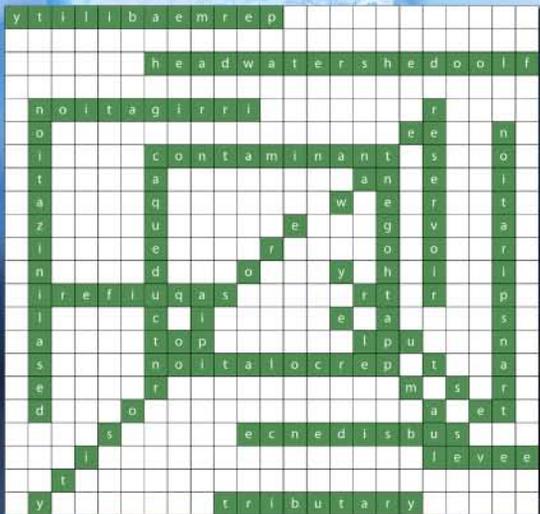


Sanitation” fun run. Building on the great work already accomplished we can turn the tide of preventable water-related disease and death.



John Sauer works for Water Advocates, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that provides pro-bono consulting services to leaders of corporations, found-ations, and civic and faith-based organizations looking to increase their support for worldwide access to safe, affordable and sustainable drinking water and sanitation. (www.wateradvocates.org)

WORD PUZZLE ANSWER KEY



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