

# d unacceptable

## COLIFORM BACTERIA



Foul: Liam Allen with a glass of tap water

## My wife got a rash just from showering in it

GALWAY father-of-three Liam Allen says the pressure he applied on Irish Water to deliver clean drinking water to his home in Clifden is beginning to pay off. The utility company sent contractors to Mr Allen's home yesterday to repair the pipe that has been delivering contaminated water to his family since the start of the year. In March, residents of Mr Allen's estate commissioned their own €150 lab tests which detected col-

iform bacteria in the water - indicating that animal faeces had contaminated their supply. Although his family do not drink the water, his children - Alana, 11, Kevin, eight, and two-year-old Matthew - have had bad reactions simply from showering. 'My wife came down with a rash on her arm. We've all suffered from sore throats,' he says. 'The local doctor has always said it's the water that was making local people sick,' Mr Allen

said. 'A lot of the health issues are from the mains.' Mr Allen said he had been contacted by people from all over the country with similar problems. 'People are ringing me. There are a lot of places in Connemara with the same problem but this is a national thing. The system needs to be fixed before they start charging people. 'Irish Water wouldn't have done anything if it wasn't for the pressure we put on them.'

## Bottled water is costing us a fortune

RICHARD O'Halloran lives in one of 330 houses in St Brendan's Park in Tralee where residents have to rely on bottled water because of lead in the public supply. The risks associated with consuming lead, which can cause physical and mental deformities in babies, and kidney or blood pressure problems in adults, have prompted his wife, Helen, and 17-year-old daughter, Rebecca, to



## LEAD

Toxicity: Richard O'Halloran and neighbours

avoid drinking tap water completely. 'They've been on bottled water for ages and it costs a fortune but you can't put a price on health,' says Richard. He says the problem of the lead pipes has been ignored for decades. 'We haven't heard one thing from the council,'

he said. 'They expect us to pay for the water and they're not doing anything about it.' Richard was sceptical of Irish Water's plan to replace the estate's pipes by Christmas. 'If they are going to do it in three months they must be doing a miracle,' he added.

Pensioner: Mary Murtagh



## It was thick and black like slurry. I got sick

MARY Murtagh, 67, who lives with her husband Aiden, 69, in Castlereea, Co. Roscommon, says the water coming from her tap is 'dreadful'. 'We're worse than the Third World,' she says. 'I should not be having these problems at this stage of my life.' The Murtaghs spend €60 a week on water because they're forced to wash their hands and food and even shower in bottled water. 'We've been boiling our water for eight years, thinking that was sufficient. But just before Christmas, it was like slurry, thick and black. I got very ill. 'It was contaminated with Cryptosporidium. Now seemingly it's contaminated with a lot of different bugs. We also have faecal matter in it. 'Irish Water wasn't in until April so between January and April, there was nobody to talk to. 'The EPA said keep drinking it. I said, "If I send it up to you, will you drink it?" The girl said, "Don't be silly". 'Nobody wants to know.'

## PARASITES

break in a filter bed that allows the water to pass through without contacting the filter and being cleaned. When the water treatment system does not effectively ensure the removal of the bug, it can break through the treatment barrier and enter the public supply. Dr. Lucy explained: 'Because of the generally good quality of the raw water back when these systems were being built, most of our sewage treatment plants are not designed to stop pathogens - only a few in the country are.'

### How much does the equipment cost?

For UK towns which are a similar size to Galway, with a population of less than 300,000, the entire engineering project would cost no less than €500,000 and no more than €3million. This would include raw materials, civil engineering and treatment costs. Professor Colbourne explained that 'you can't just buy the equipment and plug it in. The biggest cost is the civil engineering to supply it all. It's an overall civil engineering plan - and in most cases the cost would be mostly in the concrete, the pipes and valves and that's all part of the civil engineering contract. She

explained that the size and cost of the contract depends on the size of the plant, the existing treatment facilities and the nature of the problem.

### Whose responsibility is it to put the equipment in?

All public water supplies are now the responsibility of Irish Water and they are responsible for ensuring that proper treatment is in place. Irish Water confirmed that it is 'responsible for the planning and implementation of appropriate treatment of drinking water, subject to adequate funding being made available.'

### Why has this equipment not been put in before?

Irish Water insists that there has

been insufficient investment to treat this problem by the local authorities from which IW inherited the water infrastructure. Dr. Lucy said: 'While the UK is ahead, they have been carrying out research longer than us. We're now starting a reference laboratory project which the UK has had for certainly a decade. 'Historically, we're very vulnerable because of differences in investment in infrastructure and under-investment during the Celtic Tiger, when this was not a priority. 'During the Celtic Tiger era, our population grew massively but water treatment investment did not grow with it. 'There is a lot of old infrastructure to be repaired and improved and

this won't happen overnight.'

### When will it proper treatment facilities be put in place?

Irish Water claims to have a programme of work to address drinking water quality deficits across the country, with cryptosporidium being a high priority driver of the investment plans.

### What are the other main water problems?

There are 25,888 people connected to supplies that are infected by cryptosporidium or e-coli or have unacceptable levels of lead or nitrates present making them unfit for human consumption

under HSE guidelines. E-coli are bacteria that live in the gut of humans and animals, Their presence in the water are an indication that the water supply is being contaminated either with animal faeces, most likely from agriculture, or with human faeces, most likely from septic tanks. The presence of highly toxic lead, which can cause physical and mental deformities in young children, as well as kidney problems and high blood pressure in adults, is usually because of old lead pipes or fittings. These mostly occur inside older houses but are sometimes part of the public supply. Most of the chemicals present in the drinking water supply are by-products of faulty or outdated disinfectant processes at water treatment plants.

### How could those problems be solved?

If proper treatment is in place and is managed correctly then the risk is minimised. Dr. Lucy says: 'Everybody thinks you can just fix these problems but you have to ask about the water coming in too. We should be looking to improve the environment, then look to improve our water treatment - but they go hand in hand.'

**'This is not sub-Saharan Africa... For the Irish public to tolerate such inferior service from a 21st century utility would be unthinkable...'**