

High-quality water keeps local supply safe, says water works official

By Zach Tyler, Star Staff Writer, ztyler@annistonstar.com | Posted: Wednesday, January 27, 2016 7:06 pm

Each week, Anniston Water Works and Sewer Board technicians test the crystal clear water pumped from Coldwater Spring and eventually piped to many of the faucets in Calhoun County.

They check the spring water's acidity, assistant general manager Rodney Owens said Wednesday, and the levels of naturally-occurring minerals like copper. They look, too, for the neurotoxin lead.

“We don’t think we have issues, and all indications are that we don’t,” he said by phone. “Our source water is of such high quality that it doesn’t cause corrosive activity.”

For that very reason, Owens says, those who drink the water Anniston’s board provides have little reason to fear lead poisoning.

Not so in Flint, Mich., where residents are drinking bottled water distributed by the National Guard.

There, an emergency manager placed by Gov. Rick Snyder chose in April 2014 to provide residents water from the long-polluted Flint River, reportedly in an effort to save the city money, according to local and national news reports. The acidic water dissolved lead within the city’s pipes, carrying it to the same residents’ sinks and showers, those reports said. City and state officials then for months denied there was anything wrong when pressed by those residents, who complained of thinning hair, stomach problems and rashes, the reports said.

The slow uncovering of the poisoning in Flint — where a pediatrician found last year that rates of elevated lead levels in the blood of tested children had more than doubled, according to the news site FiveThirtyEight.com — sparked outrage the world over.

Even a tiny amount of lead in a child’s blood, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, can “affect IQ, ability to pay attention, and academic achievement,” according to the agency’s website. Negative effects from exposure “cannot be corrected.”

The knowledge that an entire generation of Flint’s children may have been exposed to lead when they shouldn’t have has started a conversation on where the same poison could be found in other states.

“There are many risk factors,” Erica Liebelt, a Children’s of Alabama pediatrician, told reporters during a Wednesday teleconference organized by the hospital.

The most common source of lead exposure in Alabama, Liebelt said, is from lead dust, encountered while “living in or visiting a house built before 1950, or sometimes before 1978 if there is chipping

or peeling paint.”

The pediatrician also is a consultant to the Alabama Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Project, an initiative of the state Department of Public Health and Medicaid Agency. The project monitors results of blood testing on at-risk children, and coordinates treatment for those determined poisoned. Efforts to reach the project’s director Wednesday were unsuccessful.

According to CDC guidelines, there is no safe level of lead allowed in the blood. The organization has in the past staked out a “level of concern” at 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, but recently revised its stance.

Children with blood lead levels greater than 5 micrograms per deciliter should now receive diagnostic testing, according to the agency. Medical treatment — known as chelation — is advised for children with lead levels over 45 micrograms per deciliter, and relies on a chemical to remove the heavy metal from the blood.

The CDC also collects from states and maintains online data on blood screens with results of 5 micrograms or higher, but the data appears incomplete.

More than half of the children reported tested in Alabama’s Houston County, for example, showed results over the 10 microgram mark. But according to the data, only 12 of the county’s more than 25,000 residents under the age of 18 were tested that year — too small a sample size to be representative of the entire county, contends a release from the city of Dothan.

At least 16 states don’t send the CDC test results at all, according to the agency’s website.

Clinicians in Alabama “are not mandated to report anything lower” than 10 micrograms per deciliter, Liebelt said, meaning that many tests may go unreported to the federal agency.

The pediatrician said that in the last five years, only 7 children have been treated for lead poisoning at Children’s. She thinks more than 24,000 Alabama children were tested for lead last year — but the testing targets children believed to be exposed to lead.

Liebelt said that means “we really don’t know” how many other children could be exposed to lead, even at low levels; the early stages of poisoning can often be asymptomatic.

The pediatrician says she believes testing should be mandatory, especially in areas of the state with dated housing, but recognizes there’s an obstacle: funding for the tests.

“It’s a cost-benefit ratio,” Liebelt said. “Is it worth spending all this money screening if you’re going to find one kid with an elevated lead level?”