Flint lead crisis prompts new AMA policy on water purity

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The AMA took vigorous action in response to lead contamination in the water in Flint, Mich., with extensive policy intended to promote public health and safety not only in that city but across the nation.

Making a clear connection between Flint’s crisis and the health of all Americans, the AMA adopted policy Tuesday at the 2016 AMA Annual Meeting, encouraging the timely removal of lead service lines, public availability of water test results, regular testing of water at schools, daycares and health care facilities, and more.

“We must do everything in our power to ensure that another Flint-like water crisis never happens again,” incoming AMA President Andrew W. Gurman, MD, said in a news release. “To truly ensure that our nation’s water supply is safe and free of lead, we are calling for measures to actively monitor the drinking water within our communities, require timely notification to the public when lead levels are high, and completely move away from a lead-based plumbing infrastructure.”

The new policy calls for:

- Removing in a timely manner lead service lines and other leaded plumbing materials that come into contact with drinking water
- Requiring public water systems to establish a mechanism for consumers to access information on lead service line locations
- Informing consumers about the health risks of partial lead service line replacement
- Requiring the inclusion of schools, licensed daycare and health care settings among the sites routinely tested by municipal water quality assurance systems
- Improving public access to testing data on water lead levels by requiring testing results from public water systems to be posted on a publicly available website in a reasonable timeframe to allow consumers to take precautions to protect their health
- Establishing more robust and frequent public education efforts and outreach to consumers that have lead service lines, including vulnerable populations
Requiring public water systems to notify public health agencies and health care providers when local water samples test above the action level for lead
Seeking to shorten and streamline the compliance deadline requirements in the Safe Drinking Water Act

“We know that there is no safe level of lead consumption, yet 20 percent of the lead that is ingested comes from the drinking water that flows through lead plumbing in communities across the nation,” Dr. Gurman said.

“Evidence clearly shows that lead plumbing is a major source of lead in our drinking water,” he said. “The AMA believes now is the time for America to take swift action to replace all lead plumbing throughout the country. We pledge to advocate for the removal of lead plumbing as well as federal standards to ensure that our drinking water is actually lead-free.”

Monitoring water at schools and daycare sites

Children are among the most vulnerable to the toxic effects of lead, yet schools and daycare centers are not required to test the water they give children.

As a result of today’s policy action, the AMA also will advocate for laws that require all schools and registered daycare sites to receive routine municipal water quality assurance testing. Current laws do not require municipalities to test water at school and daycare sites in the U.S., and water testing by the facility is voluntary. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 90,000 public schools and 500,000 child care facilities are not being regulated, and may or may not be conducting quality testing of their drinking water.

“Even though children and infants absorb more lead than the average adult, there are no real safeguards in place to ensure that the drinking water is safe at the facilities where most of their time is spent,” said Dr. Kobler. “We must do everything we can to change the law to make sure our young people are kept safe and healthy.”

Because those affected from lead exposure will continue to require dedicated attention, the AMA is advocating for biologic testing for children with elevated blood lead levels and health screenings and nutritional support for all people exposed to lead contaminated water.