

FLINT: THE LEGIONNAIRES WILL BE WHAT BRINGS CRIMINAL CHARGES

In my discussions about Flint's water crisis, I keep pointing out that Rick Snyder was largely just making a show of responding until the US Attorney revealed it had started an investigation on January 5.

The Detroit News has an utterly damning report today about the part of the story that gets less national attention: local and state officials started discussing an outbreak of Legionnaires disease back in October 2014, and national experts offered help as early as March 2015, but the state did not accept assistance offered by both the EPA and CDC until January.

Darren Lytle, an expert in Legionella from the EPA's Cincinnati office, told his colleagues that his previous research showed that changes in water chemistry can cause disruption and "destabilize" water piping systems. Lytle "thought the incidence of Legionella must be fairly extensive for the (Genesee County Health Department) to notice and study," according to the conference call notes.

Lytle offered to come to Flint and study the origins of the pneumonia-causing bacteria, records show.

But state and county officials appear to have never followed through with the offer for help, an EPA official said. As it did in Flint's lead contamination, the agency stayed publicly silent about the threats to public health in Genesee County while state and local officials debated how to approach the problem, records show.

[snip]

The Legionnaires' disease outbreak that infected 87 Flint-area residents and caused nine deaths from April 2014 through November was not made public until Jan. 13, when Snyder announced them in a hastily called press conference in Detroit. Snyder had learned of the outbreak two days before, an aide said.

In January, state health officials finally requested support from CDC's Legionella experts 11 months after it was offered, Nordlund said.

Through that entire time period, state officials pretended they were developing a public information campaign to tell Flint residents about the outbreak. And, as the story reminds, nine people died directly from Legionnaires during that period.

Shortly after the feds revealed they were investigating, the Attorney General announced his own (very conflicted) investigation, the investigator for which, Andy Arena, claimed is the biggest investigation in Michigan history (Arena led the investigation into the UndieBomb attack while still at the FBI). It has been unclear what those investigations might find or whether anyone would be found of breaking the law. Certainly, on the lead poisoning, the state seemed to believe they were adequately testing for lead (even though, as this story notes, local authorities were far more worried about months before the state officials).

But I have to believe the Legionnaires is where people are really exposed for criminal negligence, as they let people continue to be exposed to deadly bacteria months and months after federal officials tried to help.