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Dutch tap water to be chlorinated

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Eindhoven Netherlands

The Dutch water companies have to add chlorine to our drinking water. It's the only way to deal effectively with the bacteria which cause legionnaires' disease. Until now chlorine in the water has been taboo in the Netherlands. The Dutch are extremely proud of their pure, good-tasting, unchlorinated drinking water.

That will have to change says Annelies van Bronswijk, Professor of Health Technology at Eindhoven University of Technology. Professor Van Bronswijk estimates that 800 people die of legionnaires' disease each year, many more than the dozens quoted in the official statistics. She explains how she arrives at this figure.

"Well, you can look at the figures from surrounding countries before and after chlorination and make an estimation of what the real situation is in the Netherlands. Here in the Netherlands we do not know the underlying causes behind most of the cases of people who die of double pneumonia."

It's just a question of adding two and two, since severe pneumonia is what most people with legionnaires' disease die from.

At-risk groups

The National Institute of Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) agrees with the call to chlorinate drinking water. Jim van Steenberghe, head of RIVM's Infectious Disease Control, says, "Professor Van Bronswijk has a good point." But the whole country doesn't have to switch to chlorinated water at a stroke. "Hospitals, nursing homes and care centres, where vulnerable people live, can chlorinate their water individually as it enters the building."

Unlike other countries, the Dutch government does not add chlorine to the drinking water on the grounds that it may contain potentially carcinogenic substances and is damaging to the environment. Moreover, many people regard chlorinated water as unpleasant-tasting. Professor van Bronswijk soon dispenses with those arguments...

"To start with we no longer chlorinate with the same old chlorine that use to be added. These days it's monochloramine, a compound of chlorine particularly suited to the purpose. It doesn't leave a taste. Besides almost anything you get too much of can be poisonous or carcinogenic. You just have to be careful, not too much, not too little. With chlorine you do have to be extra careful what you do."

Proud

Professor Van Bronswijk is pleased with the support from the RIVM because she has been crying in the wilderness in the Netherlands for some time now, without making any impression in The Hague. She is all too aware that Dutch people would rather not be told that we should put chlorine in our drinking water, since we're so proud of our "unchlorinated super-water". She sighs: "Sometimes I think it just needs a family member of a politician to get sick with legionnaires' disease... maybe that would help."