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## Michigan Health Department Hid Evidence of Health Harm Due to Lead Contaminated Water: Allowed False Public Assurances by MDEQ and Stonewalled Outside Researchers

[December 21, 2015 Siddhartha Roy Articles](#)

After missing warning signs of spiking childhood lead poisoning that occurred a few months after switching to a corrosive river water source in 2014, outside pressure forced officials at the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to closely scrutinize their data in July 2015. They discovered scientifically conclusive evidence of an anomalous increase in childhood lead poisoning summer 2014 immediately after the switch in water sources, but stood by silently as MDEQ officials repeatedly and falsely stated that no spike in blood lead levels (BLL) of children had occurred. DHHS employees later stonewalled efforts by outside researchers who questioned MDEQs statements, withheld damning documents but released incomplete data suggesting that there were no problems—DHHS officials ultimately fessed up only after incidence of childhood lead poisoning skyrocketed **above 10% in the two Flint zip codes with highest water lead risk during summer 2015!**

### DHHS Pressured to Examine Data in mid-July 2015

DHHS' engagement in the Flint water crisis, started in early 2015 with two phone calls from Lee-Anne Walters to a state lead poisoning nurse in Lansing identified only as "Karen." When asked about the phone call last night, Walters said she was at first expressing concern over high water lead measurements in Flint, but on the second call she was in tears because her son's blood lead had increased to 6.5 ug/dL.

According to Walters, "Karen" stated that ***"He is barely lead poisoned. If CDC had not changed their lead poisoning standard from 10 down to 5, we would not be having this conversation."*** Angry, Walters protested that Karen was minimizing the problem, at which point "Karen" cut her off and

said ***“I am working with kids in their 40’s and 50’s. It is just a few IQ points...it is not the end of the world.”*** FOIA e-mails demonstrate that Karen Lishinski (DHHS) acknowledged receiving phone calls on the dates Walters called (the caller’s name is redacted in the FOIA), but elsewhere Lishinski acknowledges to colleagues that the last time she actually worked with a child who had blood lead above 45 ug/dL was in 2009.

The next time the Flint water issue was apparently raised at DHHS, was July 23<sup>rd</sup>, when Linda Dykema (DCH) sent out an e-mail titled ***“R.E.Director’s Office Assignment- Flint- need update ASAP”*** on the heels of the memo written by EPA’s Miguel Del Toral.

### **Misinformed from the Outset: MDEQ Garbage-in All but Ensures DHHS Garbage-out**

The Director’s Office update was tainted and probably doomed from the start, because Dykema logically reached out to MDEQ’s Steve Busch for background who provided her the following insights:

***“The city of Flint recently conducted drinking water testing throughout the city with special attention to those areas known to have old service lines. The city water supply is in compliance with the lead rule....DEQ has not seen a change in the city’s compliance with the lead rule since switching to the Flint River source....Regarding the home with high drinking water lead levels: some years ago the supply line that serves the neighborhood was replaced, but somehow this house was not connected to the new line, such that the family’s drinking water supply was coming from the old corroded lead pipe. None of the neighbors water had elevated lead level... Regarding the EPA drinking water official quoted in the press articles: the report that he issued was a result of his own research and was not reviewed or approved by EPA management. He has essentially acted outside his authority.”***

In other words, Dykema and DHHS started out their investigation with demonstrably false MDEQ talking points as assumptions. Nonetheless, a team of researchers proceeded to examine their data for possible increased incidence of lead poisoning in Flint’s children after the water switch.

### **Anomalous Increase in Lead Poisoning Noted—But False Conclusion Provided Publicly by MDEQ**

The DHHS team immediately found evidence of a problem. Specifically, in the summer months of July, August and September of 2014 immediately after the