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Water providers and researchers rarely release full test results to the public

MARTHA MENDOZA AP National Writer

When **water** providers find **pharmaceuticals** in **drinking water**, they rarely tell the public. When researchers make the same discoveries, they usually don't identify the cities involved.

There are plenty of reasons offered for the secrecy: concerns about national security, fears of panic, a feeling that the public will not understand -- even confidentiality agreements. "That's a really sensitive subject," said Elaine Archibald, executive director of California Urban **Water** Agencies, an 11-member organization comprised of the largest **water** providers in California.

She said many customers "don't know how to interpret the information. They hear something has been detected in source **water** and **drinking water**, and that's cause for alarm -- just because it's there."

As The Associated Press documented in a five-month investigation, **drinking water** provided to at least 41 million people living in 24 major metropolitan areas has tested positive for trace amounts of **pharmaceuticals**.

Most Americans probably think they have a good idea of what's being detected in their **water**. Federal law requires **water** providers to distribute annual "consumer confidence reports" that reveal levels of regulated contaminants. Providers are not, however, required to tell people if they find a contaminant that is not on a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency list. And there are no **pharmaceuticals** on the EPA list.

In Philadelphia, the **water** department has not informed its 1.5 million users that traces of 56 **pharmaceuticals** or their byproducts -- like the active ingredients in drugs to treat depression, anxiety, high cholesterol, fever and pain -- have been detected in the **drinking water**, and that 63 **pharmaceuticals** or byproducts had been found in the city's source watersheds.

Initially balking at the AP's request to provide test results, Philadelphia **Water** Department spokeswoman Laura Copeland said, "It would be irresponsible to communicate to the public about this issue, as doing so would only generate questions that scientific research has not yet answered. We don't want to create the perception where people would be alarmed."

New York City **water** officials declined repeated requests for an interview and waited more than three months before participating in an AP survey, supplying information only after being informed that every other major city in the nation had cooperated.

The AP learned that the New York state health department and the U.S. Geological Survey detected heart medicine, infection fighters, estrogen, anti-convulsants, a mood stabilizer and the active ingredient in an anti-anxiety medication in the city's watershed upstate. And the city's Department of Environmental Protection ultimately said that it does not test its downstate **drinking water**.

Officials in Arlington, Texas, said **pharmaceuticals** had been detected in source **water** but wouldn't say which ones or in what amounts, citing security concerns. Julie Hunt, director of **water** utilities, said to provide the public with information regarding "which, if any, **pharmaceuticals** or emerging compounds make it through the treatment process can assist someone who wishes to cause harm through the **water** supply."

Mayor Robert Cluck later said a trace amount of one **pharmaceutical** had survived the treatment process and had been detected in **drinking water**. He declined to name the drug, saying identifying it could cause a terrorist to intentionally release more of it, causing significant harm to residents.

"I don't want to take that chance," Cluck said. "There is no public hazard and I don't want to create one."

Ron Rhodes, **water** treatment plant supervisor in Emporia, Kan., explained why he wouldn't disclose whether his community's source **water** or **drinking water** had been tested for **pharmaceuticals**. "Well, it's because of 9/11. We want everybody to guess."

How, Rhodes was asked, could it endanger anyone to know if Emporia's **water** has been screened for traces of **pharmaceutical** compounds?

"We're not putting out more information than we have to put out," said Rhodes. "How about that?"

Milwaukee's **water** department is an anomaly, posting on its Web site an 11-page detailed **drinking water** quality report that includes test results for 450 unregulated contaminants, including **pharmaceuticals**. While they found minute concentrations of cotinine, a nicotine derivative, they didn't detect hundreds of other contaminants including estrogens and other hormones, acetaminophen and ibuprofen.

When asked what power the EPA had to require public disclosure when **pharmaceutical** contamination is discovered in a **water** provider's supplies, Benjamin H. Grumbles, the agency's assistant administrator for **water**, said, "We work very closely with utilities across the country and we encourage them to share with their community information they find out about their source **water**."

But there's no such requirement if the detected contaminant is not regulated under the Safe **Drinking Water** Act, he said in response to a question.

Grumbles was asked how he thought **water** providers have been responding to the EPA's "encouragement."

"I think we have more work to do," he said.

Several hours after the interview, Grumbles issued a statement: "As head of the National **Water** Program, I will do everything in my authority to make certain that public **water** suppliers inform their consumers if they detect **pharmaceuticals** in the **drinking water**."

It's not just the **water** departments that have failed to disclose such information.

The AP spoke with many scientists, federally funded researchers, university professors and private **drinking water** experts who have detected **pharmaceuticals** in **drinking water**, but would not say where they had obtained their samples.

Archibald said her organization joined an American **Water** Works Association Research Foundation study with the understanding that secrecy would be assured.

"We agreed ahead of time that no specific agency would be mentioned in terms of which place had detections," Archibald said. She insisted that even she didn't have the test results. "It's all being held very carefully. **Water** agencies were assigned numbers so none of us would even know what was detected in each other's **water**."

Robert Renner, the foundation's executive director, said AWWARF study participants are routinely promised anonymity. "Being involved in a study, they don't want this information blown out all over," he said.

Citing confidentiality agreements, he declined to name the 20 different **drinking water** treatment plants around the U.S. where **pharmaceuticals** have been detected in **water** heading to more than 10 million people.

"It's a hard topic to talk about without creating fear in the general public," Renner said.

Some said those fears could lead to much larger problems than the actual contamination.

Doctors "don't want people to be afraid to take their medicine because of environmental concerns," said Virginia Cunningham, an environmental executive for drug maker GlaxoSmithKline PLC.

Utilities also generally only allow scientists to test their **water** if they ensure confidentiality. In order for research to progress, scientists "need the confidence of utilities and other public/private stakeholders to allow us access to **waters** which we can study without any negative implications for those stakeholders," said Howard Weinberg, an environmental chemist at University of North Carolina. "Without this confidence, such research could not be undertaken."

John Vargo, program manager at the University of Iowa's University Hygienic Laboratory, said he found traces of **pharmaceuticals** in the finished **drinking water** of several major Midwestern cities but, under terms of those contracts,

he could not disclose their identity.

Peter Rogers, Harvard University professor of environmental engineering, said improvements in detection techniques could help fuel fears among the general public.

"We're chasing this down to molecular-sized measurements, so the more you look, the more you find," said Rogers. "I think the government and utilities are quite right to be very skittish about telling people their results. People will claim it is causing all sorts of problems. If I were a **water** utility, I would stop those measurements right away because if you measure something, it will get out, and people will overreact. I can just imagine a whole slew of lawsuits."

National Writer Jeff Donn and writer Justin Pritchard also contributed to this report. The AP National Investigative Team can be reached at investigateap.org

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