One physician’s fight for science over politics

What the Eyes Don’t See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City

REVIEW BY CHARLES R. MEYER, MD

The diminutive woman’s bespectacled face could barely be seen above the lectern at Minneapolis’ Westminster Presbyterian Church. She spoke evenly and precisely, telling her story of misplaced public frugality, lying leadership and factual denial. After 20 minutes, even the restful, wood-lined walls of the glorious church reverberated with anger and frustration at the injustices that had endangered the health of children in Flint, Mich. The standing ovation for Mona Hanna-Attisha, MD, lasted way beyond the standards of Minnesota polite.

An Iraqi-American whose family immigrated to the United States during the terror of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Hanna-Attisha became a practicing pediatrician and currently serves as head of the pediatric residency program at Hurley Hospital in Flint. Deriving its name from the D.H. Lawrence quote, “what the eye doesn’t see and the mind doesn’t know, doesn’t exist,” What the Eyes Don’t See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City recounts the saga of the lead contamination of Flint’s water and Hanna-Attisha’s critical role in uncovering the attempts to hide it.

Flint was a sick city before its water had excess lead, with household income at half the U.S. median, crime-riddled streets that led Navy Seals to train there because it so resembled a war zone and a life expectancy 15 years less than the national average for children born in Flint. Facing bankruptcy, Flint was involuntarily declared an economic emergency by the Michigan governor and placed under the direction of an emergency manager, who supplanted the mayor. As a cost-saving measure, the emergency manager stopped purchasing Lake Huron water from Detroit’s water management department and started drawing water from the Flint River instead. Shortly after this move in 2014, residents began noticing brown, smelly water issuing from their taps. In the first of the cover-ups, an Environmental Protection Agency investigator examined a Flint home in 2015 and found that the pipes serving the home were leaching lead, that the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality was using faulty testing procedures and that Flint wasn’t using corrosion control, which caused the leaching. When he submitted his report, the investigator was reprimanded and referred to an ethics committee.

Hanna-Attisha learned about this and the previous Washington, DC, water crisis from a high school friend who worked as an environmental engineer. In 2002, Washington DC, had switched from chlorine to chloramine to better suppress bacteria in drinking water. The dangerous side effect of this was increased corrosion of lead pipes and leaching of lead into the drinking water. In a nauseating foreshadowing of the Flint scandal, officials at the Centers for Disease Control denied the facts of drinking water lead contamination presented in a report and waited until 2010 to acknowledge their mistake.

Gathering data about children’s blood lead levels before and after the change in source of Flint water, Hanna-Attisha battled first Flint and Michigan officials, then the news media, with proof that the change had caused elevated lead levels in a substantial number of Flint’s children. She persisted through official denials and ad hominem attacks made even when authorities had not examined the data: “Even before bothering to analyze my findings, the governor’s office and the state agencies launched a systematic effort to undermine and discredit me.” She prevailed and some of the officials who tried to stymie her ended up with criminal charges against them.

According to Hanna-Attisha, the story of Flint’s water is “the story of a government poisoning its own citizens, and then lying about it. It is a story about what happens when the very people responsible for keeping us safe care more about money and power than they care about us, or our children.” Interwoven with humanizing details about Hanna-Attisha’s personal and profession life, What the Eyes Don’t See is also the inspiring story of a physician who martialed her science to overcome the dysfunctional and dangerous side of politics.

As I write this, there are reports about lead in the water of Newark and the prolonged public denials from New Jersey authorities that the drinking water was anything but safe. “Déjà vu,” that bespectacled, diminutive, fire-breathing physician from Flint is likely saying. MM

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