

The Great Lead Water Pipe Disaster



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In *The Great Lead Water Pipe Disaster*, Werner Troesken looks at a long-running environmental and public health catastrophe: 150 years of lead pipes in local water systems and the associated sickness, premature death, political inaction, and social denial. The harmful effects of lead water pipes became apparent almost as soon as cities the world over began to install them. Doctors and scientists noted cases of acute illness and death attributable to lead in public water beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, and an editorial in the *New York Herald* called for the city to study the matter after a bizarre illness made headlines in 1868. But officials took no action for many years. New York City, for example, did not take any steps to reduce lead levels in water until 1992, long after the most serious damage had been done. By then, in any case, much of the old lead pipe had been replaced with safer materials. Troesken examines the health effects of lead exposure, analyzing cases from New York City, Boston, and Glasgow and many smaller towns in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and England. He draws on period accounts, government reports, court decisions, and economic and demographic analysis to document the widespread nature of the problem, the recognized health effects--particularly for pregnant women and young children--and official intransigence. He presents an accessible overview of the old and new science of lead exposure--explaining, for example, why areas with soft water

suffered more harmful effects than areas with hard water. And he gives us compelling and vivid accounts of the people and politics involved. The effects of lead in water continue to be felt; many older houses still have lead service pipes. The Great Lead Water Pipe Disaster is essential reading for understanding this past and ongoing public health problem.

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