

# Hundreds attend University of Michigan talk on Flint water crisis

By Carlos Delgado  
6 February 2016

Hundreds of students, faculty and community members gathered into a lecture hall at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health in Ann Arbor on Wednesday to hear Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha deliver a talk on the roots and the devastating social impact of the Flint water crisis.

Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at Hurley Medical Center in Flint, was instrumental in helping expose the scope of the crisis. In September she held a press conference in which she revealed that the blood lead levels of Flint children had spiked dramatically since the city switched its water source from the Detroit water system to Flint River water. She was immediately made an object of official scorn, as state officials attempted to minimize and discredit her findings. The governor's office claimed that she had "spliced and diced" the data.

As public outrage mounted over the crisis, however, government officials changed their line. Hanna-Attisha has since been named to Governor Rick Snyder's Interagency Coordinating Committee for Flint, and she has been brought in to assist with the EPA's Flint Task Force.

The event on Wednesday drew wide interest from students across the university, with the large lecture hall filled to capacity and two overflow rooms needed to hold all those who showed up. There was a widespread desire to understand how, in the wealthiest nation on earth, a public health catastrophe of this magnitude could occur.

Attendees listened intently as Hanna-Attisha described the conditions that precipitated the crisis. Describing a "perfect storm" of government abuse and neglect, she pointed to the aging, predominantly lead-based infrastructure of the city; the decades of population decline and the exorbitant water rates, both

of which caused reduced water usage and created more stasis in the infrastructure, which allowed more lead to leach into the water supply; the "criminal," in her words, decision to not add phosphates to the water treatment for corrosion control; and the callous negligence of state officials who turned a deaf ear on residents' complaints.

Regarding the official disregard of residents' objections, she noted, "If you talk to people who grew up in Flint, they said, 'You know, when we were kids, we could light a match on the Flint River.'" She added, "Right away the water was brown. It tasted gross, it looked gross, it smelled gross. People complained instantly, complaints of rashes and hair loss and all these different things. But it fell on deaf ears."

Hanna-Attisha further discussed the deleterious effects of lead, especially on children and infants: "If you were to put something in the population to keep them down, now and for generations to come, it would be lead. It is a well-known, potent, irreversible neurotoxin. There is no safe level of lead for the CDC, for the American Academy of Pediatrics. Lead should never be in a child, and if it is in a child, you've messed up. It's too late."

Lead exposure, she continued, causes a significant drop in IQ, damages every vital organ, leads to a whole host of cognitive and behavioral problems, causes impulse disorders, severely impairs a child's ability to focus and concentrate, and has been linked to an increase in criminality.

What's more, she pointed out that her data, which showed a staggering twofold increase in the number of Flint children with elevated blood lead levels, actually significantly underestimated the number of children exposed to lead. Lead screening tests are only conducted for children between the ages of one and two

years, when they are most likely to be exposed to lead-based paint. With lead-tainted water, however, children are likely to be exposed much earlier, and many infants in the city had been drinking lead-laced formula for the first six months of their lives.

After noting that lead-based abortion pills were used in 19th century England, she said Flint residents likely have suffered miscarriages from lead exposure as well.

“What have we done to an entire population?” she asked.

Attendees responded with audible shock and disgust as she described a population that has been severely traumatized, not only by lead, but by the whole host of social ills that have plagued the city of Flint for decades, including a 40 percent poverty rate (and the attendant high levels of crime and violence), a school system with only a single nurse for 6,500 students, severe housing instability, and a lack of access to quality food and health care.

“Our kids have every obstacle to success,” she said, “and then they got lead.”

After first attempting to stonewall and discredit her, government officials at both the state and federal levels are seeking to co-opt Hanna-Attisha’s work in an attempt to save face and contain popular anger over the crisis. The day before the University of Michigan event, she appeared at a press conference with EPA head administrator Gina McCarthy that was largely geared toward political damage control.

When asked by a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter about how she would account for the change in the government’s line toward her, Dr. Hanna-Attisha said, “I think there was a period of deny, deny, deny, deny. If you read the governor’s task force report, it says that the state was spending more time fighting people than actually listening to people. ... I’m gladly working with this governor, and I don’t care about apologies, whatever happened, happened. But I have to work with this governor, and I probably have to work with the next five governors on this issue, when you consider the consequences of lead.”

“These kids did absolutely nothing wrong,” Dr. Hanna-Attisha said in her closing remarks. “Their only fault was that they lived in a poor city that was almost bankrupt and didn’t treat their water.”

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