

The work of Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha in the Flint water crisis

By James Brookfield
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Unfortunately, neither in the panel discussion at the Ann Arbor Library, nor during the questions and answers that followed, was there a great deal of discussion about the book written by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha that was the nominal subject of the event. At a minimum, the following points should be made about Hanna-Attisha's account, which notwithstanding its political limitations, deserves to be read and discussed.

1. Until the work of Dr. Hanna-Attisha and her colleagues at the Hurley Medical Center, the city of Flint and the state of Michigan denied the claims of residents that the water was made unfit to drink by the switch to the Flint River as the source. Discoloration, health complaints, and stratospheric lead readings were belittled. Above all, officials held to the twin claims that the water was safe for drinking and bathing and that there was no money available for the city to return to its previous source (water from Lake Huron, provided under contract with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department).

2. Hanna-Attisha and key collaborators were able to rapidly compel the city and state to change course by the immense amount of work they did in a short time, from the initial conversation between the pediatrician and her longtime friend and environmental engineer, Elin Betanzo, on August 26, 2015, through the September 24 press conference held at Hurley to announce the findings that there had been a doubling of the proportion of young Flint children with elevated levels of lead in their blood, to the announcement by Snyder on October 8 that Flint would return to

Lake Huron water. This was an intense period of work for the team led by Dr. Hanna-Attisha and its description in the book gives a feel for the pressure under which it worked.

3. In this work, a collaboration was established with the team from Virginia led by Dr. Marc Edwards who had previously uncovered the extent of lead in the Washington DC system in 2001. Inasmuch as Dr. Edwards has lately come under fire for supposedly downplaying the dangers of the lead in Flint's water and even demonstrating his own alleged "environmental racism" (by arguing that DWSD's water may have had greater lead content in 2011 than Flint's in 2015), the book's description of the joint work between the teams and Edwards' courage and willingness to stick his neck out to warn the public about the lead in Flint's water bears careful study.

4. The interweaving of the narrative of the life of Dr. Hanna-Attisha and that of her parents and grandparents (immigrants to the US from the Chaldean community in Iraq) are stirring and provide some insight as to why she played a key role in standing up for Flint residents at some peril to herself. Unfortunately, those sections that deal with role of American imperialism in Iraq—a term the doctor avoids—are weak and adapt to the idea of a war for human rights. The real purpose of the US regime-change operation—the US capitalists' drive to place a stranglehold on Iraqi natural resources and deny them to them to its rivals—is not mentioned, and perhaps not even perceived.

5. These weaknesses are bound up with the author's affinity for the Democratic Party, which supported the Iraq war. Hanna-Attisha's outlook is shaped by nostalgia for the New Deal (a key

figure in which serves as something of a hero to Hanna-Attisha—Frank Murphy, governor of Michigan in 1937-38 and then US Supreme Court justice from 1940 until his death in 1949). This political illusion seems bound up with a failure to understand both the connection between social disasters within the US like the Flint Water Crisis and the capitalist profit system as whole as well as the oppression of the country of her parents' birth and so much of the rest of the globe by imperialism, at the apex of which stands the ruling class in the US.

6. The value of the book, however, lies in its description of the events in which Dr. Hanna-Attisha took part. She found herself, upon the initial release of the data on elevated blood lead levels, in the cross-hairs of the state government public relations machine. She was accused of “splicing and dicing the data,” i.e., falsifying it. As she explains: “There’s nothing worse to say about a scientific study—or about a scientist. Splicing and dicing meant that I was knowingly lying.” Of course, events soon showed that it was the state, not the doctor, that was guilty of falsification. As Hanna-Attisha notes, in a passage of sincere and characteristic modesty, “I wasn’t the most important piece of the Flint puzzle ... I was just the last piece. The state wouldn’t stop lying until somebody came along to prove that real harm was being done to kids. Then the whole house of cards fell.” Her retelling of the meetings with Flint Mayor Dayne Walling and Governor Snyder are, once read, not soon to be forgotten; her encounters with each come not long before the effective ends of their political careers. In both cases it is readily apparent to the reader, as it was to the author, that emperor had no clothes.

7. Lastly, there are important social insights in the book, ones whose implications extend beyond what the author herself may intend at this point. She wholly identifies with the children of Flint and is full of appropriate outrage about the treatment they received, the callous disregard for their safety, and very lives on the part of the political and corporate elite. She makes the point: “When we test a child for lead, we are testing the child’s environment. Children become the

proverbial canaries in the coal mine, as we use their bodies, their lives, as instruments to test the world around them. If they test high, that means there’s lead in their environment,” a warning that comes entirely too late for the child. The apt image is that the children become subjects in a cruel experiment. Appalling conditions are created and only remediated if the harm becomes apparent, and undeniable. And even then, the remediation is allowed only to the extent that it does not seriously impinge upon the wealth of the ruling elite. And this basic dynamic is at work not simply in Flint, but throughout the US and beyond. The money-mad ruling class rips up concessions it made in earlier decades to the working class and thereby conducts almost daily new “experiments,” the impact of which is seen in the litany of statistics that point to decline in living standards, life expectancy, and other measures of social health. The doctor makes her point in the context of testing children for lead, but its more universal truth will be appreciated by those who read the book and give serious thought to its implications.

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