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24/7 municipal piped water supply is the solution

When we say, 'Water is life', we refer to the one or two litres of safe drinking water each one of us needs to consume daily. Many of us assume that the water we get either in taps – often in some places even in major cities – or from the shallow or deep borewells, is safe for drinking. The sad reality is that it is not and more importantly, a lot of the times people don't know whether the water is fit to drink directly. In fact, over the last few days, there have been reports of a spate of serious illnesses breaking out in various parts of Karnataka. The government must make sure that citizens are certain about the quality of water they are drinking. Each zone of the BBMP must have a water testing lab that offers people of the area tests at an affordable price. The BBMP could also partner with a local school, university or hospital to help with this, if it cannot set it up itself. The only way to ensure potable safe drinking water in urban settlements is through 24/7 municipal piped water supply. But many Indian cities only provide an average four hours of piped water supply. When the supply is intermittent the quality of water from the faucets in homes is not always safe to drink, even if the quality of water at the source of supply is potable. It is advisable for local water agencies to routinely seek the help of community groups to provide feedback about water quality problems and share with them results of tests conducted with samples from faucets in various neighbourhoods. Those who are well off, simply buy packaged water for drinking in many cities but this is not a sustainable solution. In my view, there are three ways to reduce unfortunate incidents of consuming polluted water. First, people should appreciate the reality that water in taps and borewells is unsafe to drink directly, and take preventive action in their homes and when they consume water. Second, households, particularly those which get water from shallow wells, should routinely boil it before drinking. While this practice is prevalent in South East Asia and in some parts of India, there are places in the country where it is still not in vogue. Households which get water through faucets, from either the municipality or their own borewells should attach some form of filters to them, which must be regularly checked and replaced once a year. Third, when water is contaminated, local bodies must consider distributing water purification sachets, that can be easily used by people, in the affected areas. Finally, washing hands with soap before eating and after using the toilet is crucial for good health. This practice should be widely encouraged through the media, in schools, and public eating places. –The writer is visiting professor and director, Institute of Water Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

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