



Tuesday 2 December 2014

**The Royal Society of Medicine and Water UK conference: Water, hydration and health: Science and public health implications**

Speech by Pamela Taylor, Chief Executive, Water UK

I am delighted to be with you today because we will be talking about the very reason why the water industry is on this earth - to protect and promote Public Health.

Indeed this is why I joined the water industry from the health sector many years ago.

I had the honour of working at the World Health Organization and the British Medical Association and the BMJ. It was a privilege working alongside so many clever people.

I was so fortunate then, just like I am today, to be in the company of scientists, doctors, health experts and many other brilliant people – together we share a passion for public health.

So let me thank the Royal Society of Medicine and the Food and Health Forum for bringing us all together today to discuss the latest views on water, hydration and

health. Today is the realisation of an idea Dr Jenny Lisle and I had many months ago.

We all know that throughout history, from the earliest civilisations, before the Industrial Revolution and right up to today, good quality drinking water has underpinned health, and the development of society.

Water UK's members – water companies - provide clean safe water for people to drink and cook with and take away and treat foul waste so that disease and pollution do not ravage us.

And we are very proud of our record. The statistics show that our drinking water is amongst the best in the world – and we remove and treat waste water effectively and efficiently. Most of this is down to the vision and foresight of engineers, designers and leaders two hundred years ago.

We have kept our focus on public health whilst the water industry's role has expanded beyond public health to include social, environmental and economic policy objectives.

Modern water suppliers have to:

- clean up water affected by all kinds of diffuse pollution;
- they have to deal with flooding from rain water from sources that our systems were never designed to cope with;

- droughts;
- they have to improve the biodiversity along water courses;
- and water companies are covering the debt of those who can't pay their bills, often writing off people's debts.

Despite these challenges we have to get the basics right. Our water industry provides people with 16 million litres of the best quality water a day. And we do this by operating enough drinking water pipes to go around the world 10 times.

We have ensured that outbreaks of water-borne diseases like Cholera are a thing of the past and everyone has access to clean water.

Sadly this is not the same for the rest of the world. According to WaterAid, the charity the water industry established over 30 years ago, 748 million, or one in 10 of the world's population, don't have access to safe water.

Over 500,000 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation.

That's over 1,400 children a day.

And not only is this water unsafe, people pay much more for their water in the developing world. That's if they can access water at all. Water in Accra, Ghana, costs three times as much as in New York.

Even in the UK, where we are fortunate to have abundant, clean safe water, we must not be complacent. There are new health challenges for us to face, to understand and to make a noise about – working together.

In the UK, we still have serious health risks – new health risks - particularly for our young people and elderly people, that must be tackled. And these are problems that water can help solve.

It is shocking that care home residents suffer dehydration-related deaths. These tragic deaths could have, and should have, been avoided. And they must be.

And if young people drink the right amounts of water, and avoid drinks high in sugar, we may turn around an obesity crisis which is already here.

Almost a third of 10-11 year olds and over a fifth of 4-5 year olds are overweight or obese.

By 2050 the prevalence of obesity is predicted to affect 60% of adult men and 50% of adult women. We all know of the many serious health problems resulting from being overweight.

Sufficient hydration is the key. Drinking tap water can help tackle these modern-day health risks. We have seen throughout history, that clean, safe water is crucial to public health.

But there is not much point in producing top quality water if only 3% is used for drinking and for cooking. Most people need to drink more.

And none of us should back away from the politics of the situation we are in. Public health matters – really matters – and we in the water sector are ready and willing to be good partners to you. Partners who can make a difference. Partners who need to make a difference.

So today's event, where we will hear from a range of experts in water, hydration and health, is so vital.

We are all looking forward to hearing the latest research, evidence, opinions and developments in this field. I'm here to learn and to act. Yes, both to learn and to act. We must all be.