

For the world's poor, drinking water can kill

By Addie Moorfoot on 05.15.13

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Derek Watson

Many people say sipping water, brushing your teeth and taking a shower are good for you. In other countries however, these things can be dangerous. Sometimes they even make people deathly ill.

For nearly 800 million people on this planet, getting sick from water is a reality. They don't have access to safe, clean water.

Petronella Muelula is a mother of eight children who lives in Zambia. She is one of the 354 million Africans who live without a supply of clean drinking water.

Petronella and her children risk becoming sick every time they drink water because the lake they drink from is polluted. The polluted water causes illness.

Not only does it make people sick, polluted water also makes it hard to grow food. It can lead to poverty.

So Much Water, Not Much to Drink

More than two-thirds of the planet is covered by water. Unfortunately, most of it is salt water, which we cannot drink. The world's fresh-water supply is mostly frozen in the polar ice caps. The majority of the remaining fresh water can be found deep underground.

Without a well, it is hard to find fresh water. Especially in places like Africa, building well systems is expensive. It is often more difficult for people in poor countries to get clean water.

Petronella walks more than 2 miles every day to collect water for her family. Still, the water she comes back with is polluted. Petronella's story was told in the film "This Is Normal". Derek Watson directed the film to bring attention to the water crisis.

"When drinking bad water sometimes children can die, so I worry because (my children could) suffer," Petronella said in the film. "I, myself, could suffer from drinking bad water."

Deadly Diarrhea

One major risk of drinking dirty water is diarrheal disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that the disease kills 1.5 million children every year.

WHO also reports that the disease causes 1.5 billion cases of illness per year in children younger than 5. Diarrhea causes the body to lose water and salts necessary for survival.

Even though the disease is preventable, it kills more children every year than HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined.

"Diarrheal disease is a lot more of a problem than many people think, certainly in the West," said Peter Kolksy, a professor at the University of North Carolina. He said people mistakenly think that diarrhea only happens when they go on vacation or eat something funny.

The United Nations said that the number of children losing their lives to polluted water and poor sanitation is greater than the number dying in wars. Much more time is spent in the news talking about wars than the water crisis.

Seeking Solutions

Oklahoma businessman Dick Greenly learned about the world water crisis. He decided to do something.

"I was astounded to discover that a sixth of our world's population is playing Russian roulette every time they take a drink of water," Greenly told Watson.

In 2008, Greenly and his wife formed an organization called Water4. The goal of the organization is to end the global water crisis.

They hope to achieve this by training people in countries including Zambia, Haiti and Rwanda to drill water wells in and around their villages.

The affordable drilling system allows locals to tap into fresh water underground.

Petronella's village now has its own fresh-water well.

Before we had this well, we had many children with diarrhea in our village, Petronella tells Watson in the film. "But at this moment it is controlled."

Water4 is one among many organizations based in America trying to resolve the worldwide water crisis.

“I have hopes and dreams for the future,” Petronella said in the film. “I hope that my children will grow up and be educated. To see that happen would make me the happiest person in the world.”