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Some doctors say a new water additive can damage health.

Water war's first volley

Attorney plans filing to block chloramine

BY CLAY LAMBERT
Staff Writer

REDWOOD CITY — Armed with medical opinions from a pair of respected physicians, a local attorney plans to file for a temporary restraining order forcing the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to refrain from adding chloramine to the Hetch Hetchy water supply.

Norman Newhouse said Friday that the novel filing comes on behalf of Denise Kula Johnson of Menlo Park. Johnson said she suffered a severe allergic reaction while taking a shower on Feb. 3 — the day after chloramine began to course through area water pipes.

The SFPUC added ammonia to its already chlorinated water supply in February to ensure it was in compliance with more stringent water quality standards coming from Washington, D.C. The ammonia bonds with

chlorine to form chloramine. Experts say the resulting disinfectant is longer lasting and safer for consumers than chlorine alone.

But a growing chorus of disenchanted water users on the Peninsula are blaming the additive for everything from the failing health of pets to serious medical conditions. Last week, Johnson joined about a dozen area residents at a Millbrae City Council meeting to decry the alleged ill effects. After the

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meeting, she recounted how she came to learn chloramine had been added to her water supply on Feb. 2.

"I almost died," she said. "I was in the shower and suddenly I could not breathe. I passed out on the floor. I was terrified."

Officials with the SFPUC acknowledge that the disinfectant can cause problems for kidney dialysis patients. Johnson said she has multiple sclerosis but is unaware of any kidney maladies. The utility warned customers the change was coming, but Johnson, a renter, said her landlord would have gotten the notice.

Johnson called Menlo Park, hoping the city would pay for a filtration system for her apartment. The city suggested she call Cal Water, a private distribution company which sells water from the SFPUC to Menlo Park. The company said her complaint must be made to the SFPUC.

"All I wanted was a filter to take the stuff out of my water," Johnson said.

Separating Johnson from

most others who have complained recently about ill effects from chloramine are Dr. Robert Bocian and Dr. Joseph Lacy. The physicians, both affiliated with the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, have provided Johnson with written statements blaming chloramine for current and potential health problems.

"Ms. Johnson's adverse reaction to the water used for bathing, as judged from ... her physical examination, is consistent with chloramine-mediated respiratory toxicity," Bocian wrote. "An abundant medical literature points to chloramine as a potential respiratory-tract irritant.

"It is not unexpected that a number of individuals on the distributive curve will be clinically sensitive to the concentration of chloramines added to their tap water," he continued.

Bocian heads the allergy department at Palo Alto Medical Foundation and is a clinical associate professor of pediatrics specializing in allergy and clinical immunology at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

Lacy, a neurologist at the

foundation, also chimed in on Johnson's behalf.

"I encourage the city of Menlo Park to consider a reasonable remedy for Ms. Johnson as chloramine is causing both ongoing and potential health problems for her," Lacy wrote.

Neither physician could be reached for comment. Calls to several branches of the SFPUC were not returned on Friday. A representative of San Francisco City Attorney Dennis Herrera said his office hadn't been served and therefore would not comment.

Newhouse, who practices in Redwood City, said he has taken the case on a contingent basis. He says he plans to file for a temporary restraining order in the city of San Francisco either this week or next. Failing that he will ask for a preliminary injunction and, ultimately, a permanent injunction against the addition of chloramine to the water.

"Our argument will be that people are being irreparably harmed right now," Newhouse said. "It is perfectly apparent that (Johnson) has suffered

damages."

Officials with the American Water Works Association said Friday they had never heard of such a court action before. The SFPUC is one of 4,700 utilities that are members of the Den-

ver-based organization of water professionals.

"I haven't seen much litigation over this," said Greg Kail, senior public affairs manager for the AWWA. "But it's a big country."

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