**SCMP Article**

**Worried HK kept its cool in water scare**

The Legislative Council is in summer recess. Schools and university students are on vacation, and office workers are discussing holiday plans. After the great political reform drama, street demonstrations and global economic uncertainties, we could all use a rest.

Instead, out of nowhere, we have a scare about lead in water.

Many of us remember warnings about lead in paint on toys and the move to ban leaded petrol. Everyone is aware that it is a poison, and that its possible long-term effects on babies and children are genuinely frightening. It is not surprising that people are alarmed at the discovery of the metal in their drinking water.

While worrying, the lead scare is also a reminder of the importance of our civil society and media, the efficiency and professionalism of government, and the calmness of Hong Kong's people.

It started with the surprise announcement that members of the Democratic Party had arranged tests on tap water at Kai Ching Estate and found that levels were above World Health Organisation standards. Other political groups rushed to do tests of their own and demanded action from officials.

The media highlighted the concerns of residents and turned the spotlight on the government. It also began to hunt for someone to blame and initially focused on contractor China State Construction Engineering. There were two possible angles. One was that it was using prefabricated units sourced from the mainland, and therefore supposedly substandard. The other was that because it was state-owned, the company would be untouchable.

It then emerged that local construction company Shui On was also involved. Since Shui On's boss is seen as a supporter of chief executive Leung Chun-ying, potential favouritism became an angle. But the media dropped that when tests at yet another estate showed that another local company, Paul Y General Contractors, was also involved. Housing secretary Anthony Cheung Bing-leung made it clear that all main contractors would be considered liable.

The government arranged alternative sources of water for estate residents and started conducting tests to establish the size of the problem. At first, 10 estates mostly completed from 2013 were tested; this is now being extended to another dozen dating since 2011. Out of 600 samples tested (as of earlier this week), 13 exceeded Hong Kong's tough standards.

Children and nursing mothers were given priority for blood tests. The results at midweek showed that 13 per cent had lead concentrations above the normal range. Health officials say these levels would be found on average in 2 or 3 per cent of the population, and the difference is almost certainly due to the water.

Officials described these as "borderline raised levels", which suggests that the health risks are actually fairly low. However, it is obviously very disturbing to residents in the estates, especially parents concerned about their small children.

It is encouraging to see that people are not overreacting. Parents seem to be generally satisfied with the government's promise of further tests for the affected children. We should focus on real health risks when considering remedial work on the estates. Diverting workers from other sites will delay construction of new housing.

The longer-term priority will be to find out what happened. The government's decision to set up a commission of inquiry under a judge seems to have reduced some of the wilder speculation and guesswork. We need hard facts about what happened, where responsibility lies and what changes to systems or penalties are needed.

Politicians raised the alarm about the lead in the water, and the media explored every angle. Under pressure, government, technical and health-care staff reacted smoothly and efficiently. And the public and affected estate residents - to their credit - remained calm. The lead scare has been a genuine concern, but at a time of division and uncertainty in the community, the response has been reassuring and, in many ways, a cause for confidence.