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DELIVERY

Response to SA water crisis disappointing



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WE OFTEN hear that South Africa is a "water-scarce" country because many parts have a dry climate or are semi-arid. It is, however, not only an uneven distribution that results in water scarcity; the huge impact of human activities such as industry, agriculture and domestic use of water should not be underestimated.

Water scarcity, droughts and widespread poor service delivery have occupied our collective mind for some time now. Hardly a week goes by without breaking news of water service interruptions or service delivery protests regarding all the aspects of ordinary lives being affected by lack of water or poor water quality. The recent, massive disruption of water supply to large parts of Johannesburg is a good illustration.

It is understandable that availability of water takes centre stage in most discussions. Access to water is a human right – without it no sustained life is possible. Water sources do not occur in an evenly spread manner across the world. But for a 'water-scarce' country our authorities are disturbingly careless about water resources and particularly water systems. I would go so far as to say that much of what is classified as water scarcity is actually an entrenched water management problem.

On World Water Day (22 March), we must also look at the damning findings of the latest official audits of the state of our municipal water systems — the Blue, Green and No Drop

reports. The quality of the municipal drinking water supplied in this country is getting steadily worse, with 46% of the supply systems that deliver water posing human health risks because the levels of disease-causing organisms are too high for human consumption.

More than two-thirds of wastewater treatment works are at a high or critically high risk of failure. That means that these works discharge poorly treated or completely untreated sewage into our rivers and the environment. This is further exacerbated by the information contained in the No Drop report that announced that about 45% of the municipalities in the country do not gather even the most basic management information that could help them run their water and sanitation services safely.

More than half of the municipalities in the country do not notify their end-users when water has been contaminated and is not safe to use. This is unacceptable, since not informing people that they may be at risk of health repercussions by consuming polluted drinking water is highly unethical and may even be illegal. Labelling such actions illegal is not very constructive in this country since the authorities are so patently reluctant to act against municipalities failing in their duties to their public.

It is clear that the overall situation regarding water in South Africa is at a tipping point and on the way to a disaster.

There is another aspect to the water crisis in this country that has not received nearly the attention that it deserves, in spite of scientists and concerned citizens calling for immediate action. This involves the contamination of our water sources by microplastic and nanoplastic particles as well as the so-called 'forever chemicals' and is a direct consequence of the poor state of wastewater treatment in the country. Only the wastewater treatment systems in our largest cities can remove some of these constituents. Apart from direct health effects on consumers of water contaminated with these compounds, the presence of these chemicals triggers the development of another disaster namely antibiotic resistance in the organisms present in such water.

The most ubiquitous of these pol-



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lutants of emerging concern has been dubbed PFAS which stands for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances. They are a large, complex group of synthetic chemicals that have been used in consumer products around the world since the 1950s.

PFAS are not only present in our drinking water but are now reported to be found in human bodies all over the world. The presence of these chemicals and the microplastic particles affect the disease-causing organisms present in the environment and allow those that are more resistant to survive longer. Antibiotic resistance can develop naturally in organisms, but this process is now greatly enhanced by the presence of such contaminants.

Antibiotic resistance has been classified by the World Health Organization as one of the top 10 threats to global health. People who are infected by resistant organisms are more difficult to treat with readily available antibiotics and their illnesses may last a lot longer or the outcome of their illnesses may be more serious. Our overburdened health services that are already staggering under the patient

load cannot cope with another, potentially avoidable crisis.

The health of humans, animals, plants and the environment are intricately linked and interdependent. These aspects cannot be separated. By polluting our water and failing to properly and safely treat the wastewater that inevitably result from water use, we are creating a contamination highway that we will soon not be able to control.

All aspects of the failure of our water systems receive plenty of attention. The responses of those who are able to address this crisis are disappointing, to say the least. The reactions often consist of a list of the budget items that will be utilised to address the problem and promises of arrangement to fix the problem and so on. These almost never seem to materialise adequately, or if they do, they are way over budget and years late.

If the public, the country's scientists, many industries and other role players could not up to now mobilise a concerted and effective drive to address these interrelated challenges, what will?