

Woburn, MA Case Study Reading

Anne Anderson and her husband Charles moved to Woburn in 1965. They bought a house in east Woburn where the Aberjona River, really no more than a stream, wound through marshes and what had been farms and orchards. But their lives were changed forever when their son Jimmy was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL) in January 1972; Jimmy was 3½ years old. Jimmy began treatments in Boston, and when he returned solicitous neighbors stopped by offering to help Anne.

During conversations with neighbors, Anne learned that there were two other children who had been diagnosed with leukemia just a few blocks away. This struck Anne as unusual. The doctor treating Jimmy for leukemia said that the cause of ALL was unknown, but one theory was that it was caused by a virus. Anne wondered if the children had been exposed to a virus in the air or perhaps in the tap water.

In A Civil Action author Jonathan Harr provided some additional insight into Anne's thoughts at the time. She said the following in a deposition some years later.

I thought there was a virus that might have been transmitted through the water, some kind of leukemia virus. The water had never tasted right, and it never smelled right. [...] you couldn't even mask it. It ruined the dishwasher. The door corroded to such a degree that it had to be replaced. The prongs that hold the dishes just gave way and broke off. On a regular basis, the pipes under the kitchen sink would leak, and under the bathroom sink. The faucets had to be replaced.

In fact, the water had not always been a problem. Complaints about the water in east Woburn began after Well G began pumping water in November of 1964. Note that the Andersons had moved to Woburn in 1965. Even more water was needed, and Well H began pumping water in 1967. Wells G and H primarily served residents in east Woburn, although some water went to residents in northern and central areas. In the summer of 1967 high bacteria counts were found in the water from Wells G and H, and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health threatened to close the wells unless the water was chlorinated. Chlorination was begun in 1968, but the complaints about the odor, taste, and rusty color of the water continued. Complaints forced the major to stop pumping in October 1969, but they were reopened whenever the demand for water increased during the summer or when there was drought. Whenever Wells G and H began pumping, there were complaints about the "putrid, ill-smelling, and foul water."

Anne Anderson tried to convince her husband, Jimmy's doctor, and town officials that something was wrong, but her concerns were dismissed. The cause of ALL was unknown, and the feeling was that the occurrence of this small cluster of leukemia cases was just a random occurrence. In addition, chlorination had reduced the bacterial counts in the water to safe levels, and the town engineer stated that the water was safe.