

The following statement was resolved by the Elders Council of the Dharriwaa Elders Group at its meeting 30 November 2018.

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Walgett's Dharriwaa Elders Group requested an opinion from a respected salt health expert regarding the quality of Walgett's drinking water. Associate Professor Jacqui Webster's statement (below) confirms that the high salt level in Walgett's drinking water is concerning for communities like ours which suffer high chronic disease burdens.

The Walgett Shire Council currently has no choice but to supply us with Great Artesian Basin water because our rivers have been grossly mismanaged for our climate and water saving measures have not been encouraged.

Dharriwaa Elders Group urges water decision-makers to ensure that communities like Walgett do not have to drink water from the Great Artesian Basin for the long term. We demand that our community is provided with reliable, safe drinking water because Water is Life.

"The sodium levels in the Walgett water supplies are concerning. 300mg/Litres is much higher than the Australian Drinking Water guideline of 180mg/L - and this guideline is based on palatability, not health. No health-based guideline value is proposed for sodium. However, the guideline does state that "*Medical practitioners treating people with severe hypertension or congestive heart failure should be aware if the sodium concentration in the patient's drinking water exceeds 20 mg/L*". The sodium content of the Walgett tap water is 15 times this amount.

If this is the community's main source of water or they are drinking it for prolonged periods of time, it could be a health risk in one of two ways. Firstly, people who consume adequate amounts of water would be ingesting a substantial amount of salt from this source – 2 Litres of water containing 300mg/L sodium equates to 1.5grams of salt per day which is a considerable proportion of the WHO 5gram per day recommended amount for salt from food and drinks. Lack of availability of fresh foods in the community also means that people are eating large amounts of salty tinned and packaged foods, resulting in higher salt intake. High salt intake can lead to a number of adverse health outcomes but most notably high blood pressure which in turn is one of



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the biggest contributors to premature death from heart disease and stroke. Diabetics also have high blood pressure and so a high salt diet further increases their risks. High salt diets also damage the kidneys and can exacerbate the long terms effects of kidney disease. Aboriginal communities suffer disproportionately high rates of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and kidney disease and poor diets are the key risk factor that needs to be addressed.

Alternatively, the fact that the water would taste salty means that people may not drink enough, including potentially substituting for sugary soft drinks which is another concerning dietary risk for the community.

Walgett's Dharriwaa Elders Group, through its Yuwaya Ngarra-li partnership with the University of New South Wales, has initiated collaborations with The George Institute for Global Health. Understanding the impact and addressing the high sodium content of the Walgett tap water is one of the issues we hope to help address through our discussions to consider community-led interventions to improve food and nutrition in Walgett.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor Jacqui Webster, Director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Population Salt Reduction, The George Institute for Global Health.

