

WATER CANCER FEARS

Europe and US would dump our precious fluid

■ By Malcolm Quekett

WA'S drinking water can contain as much as 25 times the levels of potentially cancer-causing chemical by-products allowed in other parts of the world.

An independent expert said this week he was concerned about the level of trihalomethanes allowed in water.

Environmental consultant Ronald Rosich, who is a former WA Water Corporation principal scientist, first raised his concerns with a parliamentary committee inquiring into water quality in 1998.

Dr Rosich told the Legislative Council standing committee on ecologically sustainable development that Australia had relaxed its guidelines. It allowed 250 micrograms per litre of trihalomethanes. Before 1996, it allowed 200 micrograms per litre.

Dr Rosich said Germany and Denmark set a limit of 10 micrograms per litre. The base level in the European Union was 50 and the United States allowed 80.

Trihalomethanes are produced when disinfectants, particularly chlorine, react with organic matter in water. In high concentrations, trihalomethanes can cause cancer.

Dr Rosich told the committee, chaired by Greens (WA) MLC Christine Sharp, that Australia was the only country which was relaxing its approach to trihalomethane levels.

He said this week there was debate in the scientific community about acceptable levels. But the fact that WA water was at levels above that in many parts of the world was not known publicly or debated.

Water Corporation general manager of bulk water and waste water Keith Cadee, said the risk from microbiological diseases, which could occur if water was not treated with chlorine, were higher than the risks from the disinfection by-products. The relaxed guidelines meant the corporation had greater flexibility to use chlorine.

He said the corporation operated under Health Department direction using National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines, which were based on the recommendations of the World Health Organisation. Some other countries did not use the WHO figures.

In other parts of the world, the levels included more political and consumer input. In the US, the issue was set through Congress.

"We believe there is no compelling reason why we should have a lower number for disinfection by-products," he said. "I am quite happy to drink water in Perth."

Dr Sharp said the committee's workload meant it had delayed the inquiry. But it was hoping to resume soon and report by the end of the year.

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