

Lack of water contamination information causing 'hysteria'

By Nicola Cooke

A lack of information about water-contaminating bugs such as cryptosporidium is causing unnecessary hysteria, according to the head of a specialist food and water hygiene firm.

Dr Malcom Bell, director of Limerick-based high-tech firm Technopath, said people were not aware that most forms of cryptosporidium were not harmful and were caused by the presence of sewage in water, rather than poor water treatment capabilities.

"There is a lack of knowledge about the fact that only two of the 30 strains of crypto are harmful to humans," said Bell, who was speaking at the second National Water Summit in Croke Park last week. "Most outbreaks that result in boil notices are the result of

sewage overflowing back into water supply systems. The heavy rain of recent times is compounding the problem."

Bell criticised the use of "over-designed" water systems to test for cryptosporidium in low-risk areas such as mountain water sources as "a waste of taxpayers' money and completely pointless". He highlighted the fact that many local authorities send water samples to Britain to be tested for the bug, despite the existence of five accredited laboratories in Ireland.

Bell said this was the result of "very poor lines of communication in local authorities". More than 230 people in Co Galway suffered from stomach illnesses after cryptosporidium was found in the water last year, resulting in the issuing of a boil notice on water supplies.

Professor John Anthony Allen, winner of the Stockholm

Water Prize for environmental sciences, told the summit that media reports of the cryptosporidium outbreaks became a "construction of knowledge". He said the matter had become "a political issue, instead of a health issue".

In a presentation about the recent discovery of lead in many public water supplies, Ronan Daly, a senior water consulting engineer with Atkins, suggested that local authorities should consider giving a partial grant to homeowners to replace lead pipes.

"A grant of some sort could be used as a way of incentivising people with lead pipes to replace them.

"It would also benefit water conservation, because lead leads to leakage in the piping system," said Daly. The two-day water summit was sponsored by RPS and organised by *The Sunday Business Post* and iQuest.