



UNITED KINGDOM WATER TREATMENT ASSOCIATION

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR PUBLICITY OF PERFORMANCE CLAIMS FOR WATER TREATMENT EQUIPMENT IN HOMES AND PUBLIC BUILDINGS

The UKWTA is committed to enforcing a high standard of ethics by its members, in the claims and promotion of the benefits of optional further treatment of drinking water supplies in the home and public buildings. The UKWTA also recognises its wider responsibility to promote the adoption of such ethical standards by the water treatment industry as a whole.

Potable water supplies in the UK are treated to regulated quality standards which are set nationally based on the European Community Drinking Water Directive but with additional national requirements. These requirements are demanding and provide a high level of health protection for the UK consumer. They are a matter of public record. We consider that the promotion of the sale of products based on the implication that there is serious health risk to the general population, associated with the use or consumption of drinking water supplies in the UK, is misrepresentative and unethical, in that it unjustifiably threatens the consumer's confidence in the water supply.

There are, however, genuine consumer preferences associated with water supply and the domestic distribution system which can be satisfied by additional treatment at the point of entry (POE) or point of use (POU). These preferences are predominantly aesthetic in that they relate to consumer perception of the water quality – particularly in terms of taste, odour and appearance – but also properties such as hardness levels which can affect soap usage (and cost) as well as boiler and heater efficiency and reliability.

Taste, odour and hardness

Taste and odour associated with treated drinking water supplies are usually due to residual chlorine from the disinfection treatment process. This can be due to the chlorine itself or trace organic chemicals which result from the disinfection process or even plumbing fittings with the property. Residual organics, particularly from surface water sources, can also impart taste. Whilst having no impact on health, their taste can be a deterrent to consumption. Treatment products capable of reducing these components are therefore beneficial and should be promoted as such. The products should, however, comply with recognised performance standards – and meet the appropriate regulatory requirements.

Hardness minerals, naturally present in some water supplies, cause scaling of electric kettles and scum on hot beverages such as tea. Again, this is aesthetic but its treatment can improve consumer acceptance and pleasure from the beverage.

Hardness minerals are the primary cause of scale in heating systems and consequent reduction in energy efficiency and premature system failure of water-using appliances. There are products, such as water softeners (ion-exchange), chemical and physical inhibitors that are capable of removing existing scale or controlling or preventing scale deposition which can be fitted at point of entry to treat the whole house¹ or building. Some products will also significantly help to reduce soap/detergent/chemical usage. These benefits are not only aesthetic but economic and environmental.

Benefits from products which claim to reduce taste, odour and/or hardness, are evident to the consumer and therefore verifiable by them. Product performance claims should, nonetheless, be confirmed by a recognised test standard such as British Standard Institute (BSI), European (EN) or National Sanitation Foundation (NSF).

Health claims

Adequate consumption of drinking water is essential for optimum hydration, which has a direct impact on health. Products which improve the acceptability of drinking water are therefore considered beneficial in contributing to this health benefit by encouraging consumption.

Promotion of health benefits from some water treatment products have been based on occasional media reports of water supply failures, publicity of medical studies and some websites that seek to promote health concerns – often without clear identification as to whether the concerns are based on sound scientific evidence. There are also instances of contamination of the supply from the domestic distribution system, for example, by lead or new copper pipework within the curtilage of the property or the installation of non-approved plumbing fittings.

In addition, some consumers are concerned about constituent levels in drinking water even though they may be within the regulated requirements and some aspire to drinking water which is very low in dissolved matter. This is usually prompted by the belief that this approaches chemically “pure” water and is therefore totally absent of any other constituent. Just as there is no clear evidence that there is significant health benefit from drinking water containing natural minerals, there is similarly no clear evidence of a health advantage or disadvantage of drinking low total dissolved solids (TDS) water.

These are necessarily matters for consumer informed choice but presence or level of these perceived health-related constituents is usually not evident from taste, odour or appearance, so the consumer has no way of confirming or allaying his or her concerns or aspirations. Promotional material which overtly plays on concerns by stating, without sound justification, that potentially harmful constituents are, or may well be, present at harmful levels in the drinking water supply, is preying on these fears.

Any reference to health issues in product support literature must clearly qualify the health risk (or benefit) in relation to the water supply and must be based on credible data issued by a recognised, relevant authority such as the World Health Organisation, government department (e.g. Department of Health, DEFRA), Water UK or university.

In the absence of such justification, products should not be sold against the claim that the treated water is healthier but based on recognised standards for product performance, e.g. BSI, EN, NSF, preferably confirmed by third-party certification. Such product promotion should merely state the performance capability based on recognised approval standards, and not seek to exaggerate the risk and hence the consumer concern.

It is considered acceptable, therefore, for manufacturers to list the constituents which the product is capable of reducing and its effectiveness – but not to directly state or imply that any or all of those constituents are present in the water supply at potentially harmful levels, unless supported by independent evidence from a recognised authority.

Equipment installation and maintenance

Correct installation or maintenance of all water treatment products is essential along with the need to use regulatory-compliant ancillary items (hoses/tubing/fittings) – not only for optimum performance – but also for sustaining hygienic conditions within the system. Promotional material for all products must identify the importance of selecting an appropriate installation site and competent installer, and critically, the frequency and conditions for routine maintenance.

¹ It is a strong recommendation from the water suppliers, Department of Health and the UKWTA, that, when an ion exchange softener is fitted, a separate hard water tap is provided drinking water for optional drinking water purposes.