



# PHYSICIANS JOIN TOGETHER TO ADVOCATE FOR POTABLE REUSE

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**S**CCMA physicians are not alone among medical professionals advocating for healthy, sustainable and affordable water supplies. When our SCCMA Environmental Health Committee (EHC) endorsed local plans to produce advanced purified recycled water for potable reuse, we joined a growing movement of physicians serving as trusted sources of information about the process. I recently had the opportunity to join colleagues from Texas and Southern California who also endorse their local water utilities' efforts to reuse water in a discussion about how physicians can help ensure their communities have adequate water supplies in the face of a changing climate.

## Background

In late 2021, our EHC studied the science of water reuse and water pollution with professionals from Valley Water, the agency responsible for most of Santa Clara County's water supply. Fortified with this scientific knowledge, the SCCMA accepted our recommendation to formally endorse Valley Water's advanced water purification project. The EHC then authored a Resolution to the CMA's House of Delegates in support of the safety and public health value of this advanced purification process for producing potable (drinking) water. The SCCMA also published a special issue of *The Bulletin* (2022) titled "Water and Health" in which we shared our understanding of the public health value and relevant technical and regulatory information. Since then, Valley Water has issued a request for proposals for the design of the Pure Water Silicon Valley demonstration facility direct potable reuse project, which is proposed to add 24 million gallons per day (mgd) to our local water supply by 2035. The project will reduce dependence on imported water, enhance drought resilience, and reduce land subsidence and saltwater intrusion.

In 2023, at the invitation of the national WaterReuse Association, SCCMA physicians, Dr. Ken Yew and Dr. Santosh Pandipati, spoke about the benefits of creating a dialogue between physicians and water professionals. Their message inspired the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to sponsor a national initiative, led by SCCMA and Valley Water, to further develop this collaborative engagement by bringing together physicians and utility managers from around the country.

## Panel on Physicians and Water Reuse

On July 31, 2025, I joined two other physicians in a conversation facilitated by Valley Water about the nexus between water and health and how we communicate with patients and others about the need for water reuse in our communities. El Paso, Texas pediatrician Hector Ocaranza MD now serves as the county health officer and sits on the board of El Paso Water, which is currently building a Pure Water Center to supply 10 mgd of potable water by 2028. Cardiologist Sion "Shy" Roy MD, past president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association, supports the efforts of the Las Virgenes-Triunfo Joint Powers Authority (JPA) to build the Pure Water Project Las Virgenes-Tri-



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nfo to serve Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, one element of a larger strategy to recycle most of the wastewater produced in Southern California. Our conversation centered on the essential role that physicians play in educating the public about the need for clean purified water for potable reuse in our communities and the safety of advanced water reuse technology.

As El Paso's public health officer, Dr. Ocaranza became aware of water reuse in response to questions about water from parents seeking the opinion of a knowledgeable and trusted physician. "We as practicing physicians get questions from our patients about the safety of the water, and they look to us as a trustworthy source of information," Dr. Ocaranza said. "Even though a lot of people get their research through social media, when we see these patients in the office they ask us, which is an incentive to us to become more knowledgeable about water."

After two decades of adding treated recycled water to their groundwater supplies, El Paso Water broke ground this year on a project to send further purified water directly to their water treatment facility. In view of the stringent regulations for direct potable reuse, Dr. Ocaranza emphasized that physicians need to know enough about the way water is purified to effectively communicate scientifically based information to the public. To that end, he recommended that doctors schedule a visit to the local water recycling plant. "Although we know a fair amount about microbiological contaminants in drinking water and the toxicology of chemical pollutants found in water supplies, until I saw the facility for myself, I had no idea that all this was going on right here in our community," he recalled. "Now I can attest to the quality of the water and tell them for sure that this project is going to be good for those of us who live in a desert area."

Dr. Roy offered a personal example of how important it is for physicians to become well-informed about the safety of purified water. "We're in this age of incredible information dissemination," he observed, "and I think everybody is having a hard time finding truth in all the information out there. I lost my home in the Palisades fire, and a lot of chemicals from ash and debris wound up in our underground aquifers. Even when the authorities told us that the water was safe to drink, I texted



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people I knew who knew about water to ask, *'Is this really true?'* So, if it's hard for me as a physician to trust authority, then it's really important for us to share with patients not only what we know but also where we get our information and to help them digest that information."

Dr. Roy also recommended an in-person visit to a water purification plant or a demonstration facility like the JPA's Pure Water Demonstration Facility that he toured in Calabasas, California. "When it comes to water reuse, we do not need to reinvent the wheel," he added. "There are dozens of other communities that have used this water in a very safe way."

I want to echo this sentiment because prior to SCCMA's endorsement of the "Pure Water Silicon Valley" project, I personally visited the Silicon Valley Advanced Water Purification Center, located here in San José. I can attest that touring this water purification demonstration project is a powerful and engaging learning experience.

As physicians, we understand that our patients and others in our community (including elected officials and regulators) value our opinions about health-related issues, and certainly, water reuse is one of them. Moreover, we know that the process of obtaining informed consent is an ethical and effective way to obtain permission for medical treatments. In the same light, I have tried to incorporate this model to inform our physicians, who in turn can inform their patients, with the overall objective of gaining the public's consent, acceptance and support for advanced water purification for potable reuse.

Over the years, we have had the opportunity to work closely with Valley Water professionals, and we plan to continue this collaboration to respond to public concerns about water quality. This applies not only to pathogens, but also chemical toxins such as medications patients flush down their drains, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), the "forever chemicals" prevalent in our food supplies and linked to a wide range of health issues. Our nation needs to become more responsible and effectively responsive to all facets of water contamination and pollution. It is especially imperative that there be efforts to decrease upstream pollutants, such as commercial- and industrial-related chemical contaminants that negatively impact water. As medical professionals committed to public health, we have a

great opportunity to help accomplish this.

As physicians, there are several ways we can support direct potable reuse in Santa Clara County. We can tour the Silicon Valley Advanced Water Purification Center, either virtually or in-person. Once having educated ourselves, we can also offer educational materials about purified water in our offices and be willing to answer questions from patients and the public.

As affirmed by our colleagues in El Paso and Los Angeles, physicians play a critical role in advocating for direct potable reuse. This point was reiterated by Valley Water Board Chair Tony Estremera who acknowledged the contributions of SCCMA: "We depend upon the physicians in our community to help educate the public about the need for Pure Water Silicon Valley and the safety of potable reuse, and we are grateful to SCCMA for their endorsement. We will continue to work closely with them throughout the development of this program."

SCCMA members can visit <https://purewater4u.org/> or call 408-630-3533 to schedule a guided tour of the Silicon Valley Advanced Water Purification Center.

*"I wish to thank Francesca Lomotan, MPH, Supervising Program Administrator in Valley Water's Office of Civic Engagement, for her review and editing of this article."*

### References

1. [https://issuu.com/18621/docs/q2\\_2022](https://issuu.com/18621/docs/q2_2022)



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