

Aluminum contents in drinking water from public water supplies of Galicia (Northwest Spain)

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Abstract Aluminum (Al) salts are used extensively as coagulants in drinking water treatment. Since several research works have linked Al levels in drinking water to elevated risks of Alzheimer's disease we have studied the Al content in drinking waters from populations of Galicia (NW Spain). Drinking water from 35 cities and villages in Galicia were analysed for dissolved Al and other relevant parameters (pH, turbidity, sulfate, fluoride and DOM) for the period 1997-2003. The results obtained showed an average aluminum content of 126 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$, but the variability was high, with Al levels ranged from 8 to 650 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$. The 19% and the 34% of the waters studied contained Al above 0.2 and 0.1 mg L^{-1} , respectively. Speciation studied performed using the WHAM computer model showed that most dissolved Al was DOM-complexed, although some waters containing significative amounts of labile Al, mainly as hydroxo and fluoride complexes.

Key words: aluminum; Alzheimer's disease; drinking water; speciation; WHAM.

INTRODUCTION

Aluminum (Al) is the third-most-common element in the earth's crust and is present in all natural waters. In addition, Al salts such as Al sulphate (alum) or polyaluminum chloride (PACl) are used extensively as coagulants in drinking water treatment to enhance the removal of particulate, colloidal and dissolved substances. Al-based coagulants have come under scrutiny in recent years due to concerns about metal residuals in the public water supply. The presence of Al in drinking water has given rise to discussion on possible health effects, because of its suspected connection with Alzheimer's disease or dialysis encephalopathy (Jekel, 1991). In response, various regulations have been promulgated by several agencies,



including the European Union and World Health Organisation, who have established a threshold value of $200 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ Al for drinking water.

Epidemiological studies have suggested a link between an increase in the incidence of Alzheimer's disease in regions where the levels of Al in drinking water are high (Forbes & McLachlan, 1996; Rondeau *et al*, 2000). It has been shown that other water parameters, specially water pH, turbidity and concentration of Ca, Si, fluoride and dissolved organic matter (DOM) affects the solubility behaviour and the absorption of Al in the gastrointestinal tract. A complete review about Al exposure and Alzheimer's disease can be found in Jansson (2001) and Suay & Ballester (2002).

In addition of health effects, water supply problems associated with increased Al concentration in treated water have been identified; these include increase of turbidity (Costello, 1984), interference with the disinfection process (Hoff, 1974) and deposition of Al hydrolysis products on pipe walls, which decreases carrying capacity (Costello, 1984).

The toxicity of Al is highly dependent on its speciation ("free" and complexed Al) and mobility (Masion *et al*, 2000). Total Al is the sum of suspended, colloidal and monomeric forms of Al. Particulate Al is the sum of suspended and colloidal Al. Monomeric Al can be divided into two forms: non-labile, and labile. Non-labile Al is Al associated with dissolved organic carbon. Labile Al includes aqueous (Al^{3+}), and hydroxide, fluoride and sulphate complexes of Al (Srinivasan *et al*, 1999). The soluble Al, as defined by filtration through $0.45 \mu\text{m}$ or $0.1 \mu\text{m}$ membrane filter, includes free Al^{3+} [$\text{Al}(\text{H}_2\text{O})_6^{3+}$] ion, monomeric inorganic complexes (mainly with OH^- and F^-), fine colloidal mineral Al and Al associated with the dissolved organic matter (DOM). The organic complexes of Al are less toxic than free Al^{3+} ion and the monomeric complexes (Weng *et al*, 2002).

Galicia is a region located in the NW of Spain. Soils are usually acid and rich in Al and organic matter. Surface waters in Galicia present pH values ranging from 7.9 to 5.2 (average



pH value 7.1 for coast-Galicia and 6.9 for inner-Galicia) (Antelo & Arce, 1996). Alzheimer's disease incidence in Galicia has been reported to be high. This paper reports data for Al concentration and other related parameters in treated potable waters in Galicia supplied by Espina y Delfin, S.L. The data reported were obtained from a drinking water quality monitoring program carried out between 1997 and 2003 for several populations in Galicia. The main objective of this work is to study the Al levels in drinking waters from public water supplies, considering its geographical distribution, Al speciation and complexation by inorganic and organic ligands.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Drinking water from 35 cities and villages in Galicia were collected for a five year period, between November 1997 and December 2002 (Fig. 1). A total of 68 waters were sampled and analysed for Al and other relevant parameters (pH, temperature, turbidity, calcium, silica, fluoride, sulphate, phosphate and DOM). Variations of analysed parameters for the period studied were monitoring on selected populations, based on number of habitants criteria. The waters were sampled from domestic and public utilities using sterilised acid washed polypropylene sampling bottles and conserved in the dark at 4 °C before analysis. Water samples were filtered (Millipore 0.45 µm cellulose acetate filters). Samples were acidified at pH<1 using concentrated HNO₃ (Merck Suprapur™). Al analyses were performed using graphite furnace atomic absorption spectrometry (GFAAS), employing pyrolytically coated graphite tubes and background correction (Perkin-Elmer). Argon was employed as the purge gas. Al standards were prepared by dilution with MilliQ^{PLUS} water (exceeding 18 M resistivity) of a commercial Al solution (1000 mg L⁻¹ Al).



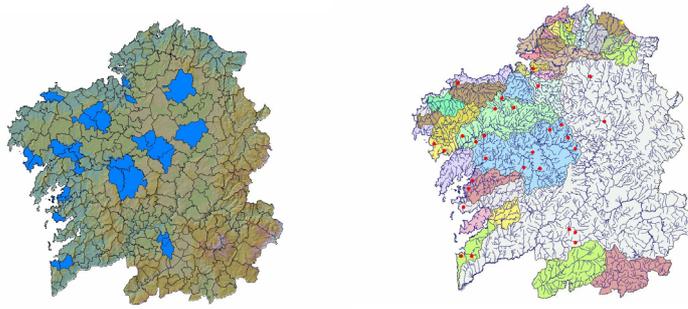


Fig. 1 Sampling points (Councils supplied by Espina y Delfin, S.L) and river basins in Galicia (NW Spain).

The detection and quantification limits (Gundersen & Steinnes, 2003) calculated for these conditions were $5 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ and $15 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ Al, respectively. pH was measured in situ with a portable pH-meter. Dissolved organic carbon (DOC) content was measured with a fully automated TOC analyzer. Turbidity, in NTU, was measured in unfiltered samples using a turbidimeter. The concentrations of Ca and Si were measured by atomic absorption spectrometry (AAS). Fluoride concentrations were measured using a fluoride ion selective electrode. Sulphate was determined by the AgNO_3 method. It must be noted that Espina y Delfin, S.L uses polyaluminum chloride as coagulant agent for treatment of drinking waters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the waters analysed, except one, contained Al above the quantification limit.. It represents a 98.5% frequency of detection of Al. This is not surprising, considering that soils in Galicia are Al-rich. Fig. 2 shows the concentrations of Al for the populations studied expressed as the ratio between determined Al concentration and MCL (0.2 mg L^{-1}). The results obtained showed an average Al content in treated waters of $126 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$, but the variability was high, with Al levels ranged from 8 to $650 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$.



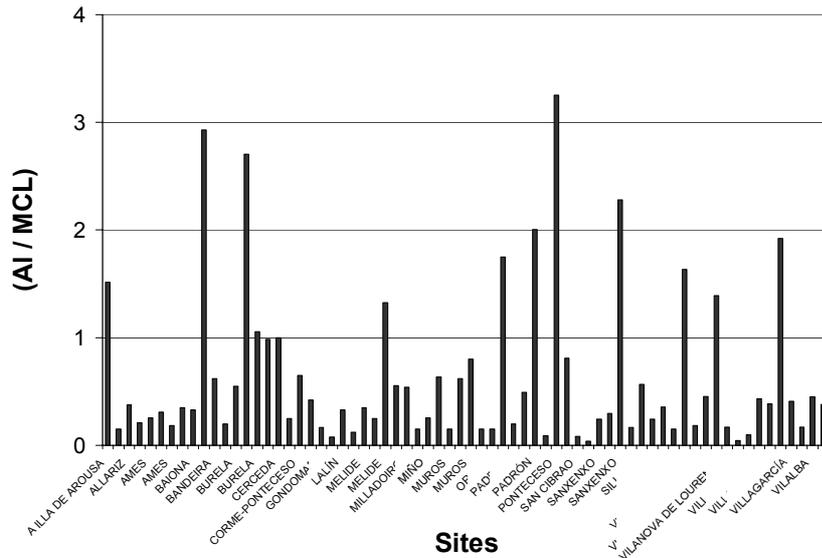


Fig. 2 Concentration of dissolved aluminum, expressed as ratio between Al and MCL (0.2 mg L^{-1}), for the studied drinking waters.

The 19% of waters analysed contained Al concentrations above the maximum concentration level of 0.2 mg L^{-1} , whereas a 34% of waters contained Al above 0.1 mg L^{-1} . The data presented in Table 1 are a summary of the results obtained for waters containing Al concentrations above 0.2 mg L^{-1} , also, as comparison, the results for a water containing the lowest Al concentration and for a water containing an intermediate Al concentration are included.

When considering geographical distribution, following the criteria of Antelo & Arce (1996), we observed that in general, the waters corresponding to Coast-Galicia basins contained more Al (mean = 0.154 mg L^{-1} , % waters with $\text{Al} > 0.2 \text{ mg L}^{-1} = 20.5\%$; $n = 44$) than the waters corresponding to Inner-Galicia basins (mean = 0.075 mg L^{-1} , % waters with $\text{Al} > 0.2 \text{ mg L}^{-1} = 8.3\%$; $n = 24$). Also, when excluding waters containing $\text{Al} > 0.2 \text{ mg/L}$, it can be established an Al baseline average value for drinking waters of $66 \text{ }\mu\text{g/L}$, which was near the mean Al concentration of $74 \text{ }\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ reported by Bodek *et al* (1988) for US surface waters. It must be stated that in the present study, all the waters containing Al concentrations above 0.2 mg L^{-1} were treated with Al-based coagulants.



Table 1 pH, turbidity, temperature, dissolved Al, DOC, sulfate, calcium, fluoride and silica concentrations for selected drinking waters.

Site	pH	Turbidity (NTU)	T (°C)	Al (mg L ⁻¹)	DOC (mg L ⁻¹)	Sulfate (mg L ⁻¹)	Calcium (mg L ⁻¹)	Fluoride (mg L ⁻¹)	Silica (mg L ⁻¹)
Burela	5.3	2.61	15	0.541	5.23	6.6	1.4	<0.05	4.5
Ponteceso	6.0	0.57	20	0.650	5.39	3.9	1.8	<0.05	4.7
Padrón	6.4	0.83	22	0.401	7.14	8.8	4.2	<0.05	8.1
Vilanova	6.8	0.68	23	0.278	6.71	3.2	2.8	<0.05	12.6
A Illa	6.7	0.67	24	0.303	7.13	5.2	3.4	<0.05	8.1
Ordes	6.5	1.31	18	0.350	6.27	5.5	4.5	<0.05	7.1
Melide	6.7	0.74	20	0.265	7.41	1.9	3.4	<0.05	9.6
Baiona	6.2	0.68	16	0.586	2.59	0.6	0.9	<0.05	6.1
Sanxenxo	6.5	0.60	15	0.456	2.18	1.5	3.0	<0.05	4.2
Vilagarcía	6.7	0.73	15	0.384	1.95	1.4	2.2	<0.05	6.0
Cerceda	6.3	0.58	19	0.200	1.99	45.9	11.6	<0.05	6.7
Cruces	5.6		12	0.327	1.30			<0.05	
Burela 2	6.0		12	0.211	1.70			<0.05	
San Cibrao	7.0	0.21	14	0.008	0.50	13.2	14.1	<0.05	2.4
Muros	7.4	1.00	17	0.124	4.60	4.0	3.1	<0.05	2.1

When studying time dependency of Al concentrations for selected populations it was observed that Al concentrations increased for the period November 2000 – November 2001. Various factors are capable of introducing a time dependency into the water quality parameters and may include some combination of climatic, land management and hydrological factors. The trends observed in this study can be explained considering that the addition of Al-based coagulants to waters, and the concentration employed, was intermittent and it was mainly a function of turbidity of raw water, which in turn depended of rainfall amount. Since the total rainfall averaged for 2001 was higher, the use of Al-based coagulants to treat waters was more intense for that period, resulting in the higher Al residual concentrations detected. Reid *et al* (2003) observed a relationship between total rainfall and failure rate for quality parameters of waters from Scotland. Measured dissolved Al concentrations in studied waters were not correlated with Al concentrations in soils.

Temperature, pH and turbidity of the water are important factors in determining Al solubility and consequently residual Al (Srinivasan et al, 1999). Al is soluble at acidic (pH<6)



and alkaline (pH>6) conditions, but is insoluble at near neutral pH values (7.0 to 7.5). Fig. 3 shows the dissolved Al concentrations vs measured pH. Although a low inverse relationship was observed, it can be observed that all the waters containing Al above 0.2 mg L⁻¹ presented pH values below 7, and the waters with the highest Al content (above 0.5 mg L⁻¹) presented pH values below 6. When the comparison was made including only the waters with Al concentrations above 0.1 mg L⁻¹ or 0.2 mg L⁻¹ we observed an inverse relationship between dissolved Al concentration and pH ($R^2 = 0.398$ and $R^2 = 0.879$). This can be explained by the fact that some waters (presenting low pH) included in the first data analysis were not treated with Al-based coagulants. Jekel (1991) reported a correlation between residual Al and effluent turbidity, observing residual Al concentrations less than 0.1 mg L⁻¹ when the effluent turbidity was less than 0.15 NTU. We did not observe such relationship for our obtained data, but specifically, all waters containing >0.1 mg L⁻¹ dissolved Al presented turbidity above 0.50 NTU and all waters presented turbidity below 0.5 NTU contained dissolved Al concentrations below 0.1 mg L⁻¹.

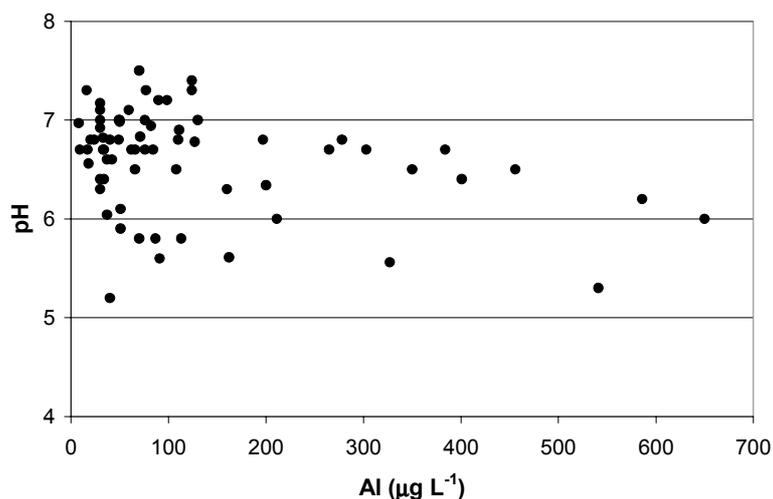


Fig. 3 Dissolved Al ($\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$) measured for drinking waters sampled versus measured pH.

Speciation plays an important role in aluminum toxicity, since the organic complexes of Al are less toxic than free Al⁺³ ion and the monomeric complexes. Researchers often rely on



models to calculate speciation (Weng *et al*, 2002). Tipping *et al* (1995) used the WHAM chemical equilibrium model to calculate the solid-solution distribution of Al. Christensen & Christensen (2000) successfully described the complexation of heavy metals by DOC in aqueous solutions at varying pH values and DOC concentrations using the WHAM model. The WHAM model (Tipping, 1994) is a combination of several sub-models. These include models for inorganic solution speciation and a humic metal ion binding model called Model V (Tipping & Hurley, 1992). Model V is a discrete-site adsorption model and includes electrostatic and competitive effects. In the present work it was assumed that 30% of DOM behaves as humic acid, 30% as fulvic acid, and 40% is inert in metal adsorption (Weng *et al*, 2002). Table 2 shows the Al speciation calculated using the WHAM model. Most Al (between 51.6 and 98.05%) was associated with DOM (*i.e.* non-labile Al).

Table 2 Aluminum complexed by dissolved organic matter (DOM) calculated using the WHAM model (Tipping, 1994) for selected drinking waters. Fractional distribution (% of labile Al) of inorganic Al species is also shown.

Site	Al-DOM	Al(OH) ₂ ⁺	Al(OH) ₄ ⁻	Al ³⁺	AlF ²⁺	AlF ₂ ⁺	AlF ₃	AlOH ²⁺	AlSO ₄ ⁺
Burela	75.06	8.13	0.10	13.65	55.25	9.97	0.05	11.96	0.87
Ponteceso	98.04	43.74	23.22	1.54	15.16	6.83	0.09	9.36	0.06
Padrón	98.01	18.69	78.67	0.08	0.79	0.37	0.01	1.38	0.01
Vilanova	93.61	3.25	96.63	<0.01	0.02	0.01	<0.01	0.09	<0.01
A Illa	95.02	4.54	95.26	<0.01	0.04	0.02	<0.01	0.15	<0.01
Ordes	51.60	18.72	78.84	0.07	0.71	0.31	<0.01	1.35	0.01
Melide	96.82	6.95	92.61	0.01	0.10	0.04	<0.01	0.29	<0.01
Baiona	68.56	42.67	37.43	0.78	8.44	3.94	0.05	6.69	0.01
Sanxenxo	96.42	24.07	71.20	0.16	1.61	0.73	0.01	2.22	<0.01
Vilagarcía	94.29	11.72	87.11	0.03	0.31	0.14	<0.01	0.68	<0.01
Cereda	94.54	28.50	64.52	0.27	2.44	1.03	0.01	3.13	0.09
Cruces	63.53	9.41	0.26	5.72	54.29	21.57	0.25	8.50	<0.01
Burela	93.14	32.30	6.66	3.29	32.00	13.70	0.18	11.65	0.21
San Cibrao	62.49	4.18	95.62	<0.01	0.04	0.02	<0.01	0.15	<0.01
Muros	81.67	0.42	99.57	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01

In general, the labile (inorganic) Al amounts were low, although for some waters significant amounts of labile Al were observed (ranging from 0.022 to 1.030 $\mu\text{mol L}^{-1}$). Main inorganic



species were hydroxo-Al complexes, but for waters with acidic pH (pH <6) Al was predominantly complexed with fluoride. It has been referenced that at acidic pH (pH = 5.8) complexation reactions between Al and F are quite efficient (Roberson & Hem, 1969).

Since the waters studied present different pH values and they contain diverse concentrations of Al, DOM and other complexing ligands, the speciation calculated can not be explained considering only one water factor. Multivariable correlation analysis showed that labile Al concentrations in the treated waters were related to pH, DOM and dissolved Al concentration ($R^2 = 0.703$).

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