

Fluoridation Works: Let Your Voice Be Heard

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It seems that the controversy surrounding water fluoridation has been around forever — or at least since 1945 when it was first introduced in Canada. Then, as today, dental decay was a serious public health issue affecting the lives of Canadians. While public opinion on fluoridation may have varied over the years, the results of systematic reviews of scientific evidence have remained constant, showing water fluoridation to be a safe and effective means of preventing dental decay. If attitudes and decisions on fluoridation were strictly based on science, there would no longer be any debate.

So why haven't all Canadian cities adopted water fluoridation where it is feasible to do so? Unlike other public health interventions that are known to be effective and are therefore mandated (such as water chlorination), the decision to add fluoride to water supplies is determined by local governments. Federal and provincial governments provide guidance on this issue, but they cannot mandate this intervention.

Support for water fluoridation is based on systematic reviews of credible evidence and position statements developed by at least 90 national and international organizations, including the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Since 1997, there have been 18 major reviews examining fluoridation, including an expert panel convened by Health Canada in 2007.

These reviews have consistently found that fluoridation is effective in reducing the risk of dental decay and is the most cost-effective way of providing the benefits of fluoride to communities. These reviews found no evidence that fluoridation has any negative environmental impact nor can it be linked to cancer, bone disease, kidney disease, birth defects or other adverse health effects.

Despite this overwhelming evidence, a small group of individuals continue to ask local

governments to stop community water fluoridation, often claiming health risks that simply aren't supported in the scientific literature. If such claims are not countered, local governments will only hear one side of the issue and may not base their decisions on credible science.

Organized dentistry is already playing an active advocacy role on fluoridation at the local level. In Ontario, representatives from CDA, the Ontario Dental Association and local dental societies have attended Board of Health and Regional Council meetings and were instrumental in winning votes that allowed fluoridation to continue in some cities. These advocacy efforts must continue as many opponents of fluoridation are now spreading unsupported claims about fluoridation via the Internet.

The dental profession needs to ensure that Canadians receive accurate messages about fluoridation. CDA is working with Health Canada to develop more resources for dentists that will be posted on the CDA website. The goal is to compile the most pertinent and current scientific evidence along with scripted material to help practitioners discuss the issue with patients. There is also an historical overview of fluoridation in Canada in this edition of *JCDA* (p. 451).

Dentists can further educate themselves by checking with local water services departments to determine if their communal drinking water supplies are fluoridated at Health Canada's optimal level of 0.7 mg/L parts per million.

Most importantly, let your voice be heard. If we want more Canadians to benefit from drinking fluoridated water, the public needs to hear dentists speaking passionately on this issue. Your provincial dental association or local dental society may already be advocating on fluoridation in your area, and this is your opportunity to become part of the decision-making process.

At present, 45% of Canadians benefit from drinking optimally fluoridated water. Commendable perhaps, but we can certainly do better. A reasonable goal is to have over 50% of Canadians drinking optimally fluoridated water by 2015. If dentistry is truly committed to doing what is best for the Canadian public, then working to promote water fluoridation must be part of that commitment.

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