



Continuing Water Fluoridation in the City of Calgary, Alberta, 1997-1998

Catherine Pryce, RN, MN
Jackie Smorang, RDH, MEd.

ABSTRACT

The issue of water fluoridation has a long history in the City of Calgary (population 820,000). There were five plebiscites before 1998, with only the 1989 plebiscite receiving a majority vote in favour of fluoridation. Calgary introduced water fluoridation in 1991.

In the fall of 1997, the City sponsored a review of water fluoridation as a public policy based on information provided by a group of concerned citizens. An expert panel was formed to look at the new scientific information on the subject; four of the five members agreed that there was not sufficient evidence upon which to make substantial changes to the water fluoridation policy. Nevertheless, the City's Standing Policy Committee on Operations and Environment recommended that a plebiscite on water fluoridation be held in conjunction with the 1998 municipal election. This decision was ultimately supported by City Council.

Under the direction of the Calgary Regional Health Authority, the Fluoride Education Steering Committee undertook three strategies for the campaign: building partnerships, educating health professionals and educating the public. In spite of the anti-fluoridation activities, Calgarians voted 55 per cent in favour of continuing fluoridation of the municipal water supply.

MeSH Key Words: fluoridation; health policy; local government.

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The Expert Panel Review

In the fall of 1997, a small group of concerned citizens convinced City Council that there was new scientific evidence on the safety of fluoridation. In response, the City of Calgary Standing Policy Committee on Operations and Environment (SPC-O&E) and the Calgary Regional Health Authority (CRHA) agreed to sponsor a review of water fluoridation as a public policy. A panel of five experts was

appointed. Support was provided by the Waterworks Division and the CRHA.

Representatives on the panel were selected for their expertise in areas relevant to the science of fluoridation: bone health, pediatrics and community health, toxicology, environmental design and biostatistics. Scientific information was provided by the CRHA and by organizations and individuals opposed to water fluoridation. Information was also sought

through advertisements and was obtained through the efforts of the panel members. The review focused on work produced since the last plebiscite in 1989. The CRHA committed to following the recommendations of the panel and was therefore prepared to recommend removing fluoride from the water if the evidence warranted this conclusion.

The panel met a number of times between December 1997 and March 1998. Four members

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reached mutual agreement on the issues, but there were differences with the fifth member that could not be resolved; therefore, the report contained a dissenting section. However, the panel stated that the opinions of the members were "very close and the disagreements [were] largely form, emphasis and level of detail."¹

Four panel members agreed that there was not sufficient new scientific evidence upon which to base a recommendation for substantial changes to the water fluoridation policy in Calgary. The fifth member concluded that there was evidence supporting health concerns, but that the evidence was weak.

Responses of the CRHA and City Council

CRHA

On May 25, the CRHA Board endorsed the report of the Expert Panel on Water Fluoridation and reaffirmed its support for the fluoridation of municipal water supplies. The CRHA Board also directed management to take the necessary action to support the maintenance of water fluoridation in light of its safety, effectiveness, and low cost.

While unanimous recommendations from the panel would have been ideal, the CRHA believed that the review of this complex body of scientific evidence had been comprehensive and was confident that the majority recommendations should be supported by the CRHA and would be supported by the City. However, the existence of a minority report was a significant and persistent issue over the course of the next several months, particularly because the opinions expressed by the dissenting panel member became increasingly negative.

City of Calgary

The panel's recommendations were received by the Commissioner and sent to SPC-O&E along with Administration's recommendation that no plebiscite be held. In spite of these recommendations, letters and presentations, SPC-O&E made the recommenda-

tion to hold a plebiscite on the issue of fluoridation in conjunction with the 1998 municipal election. This decision was ultimately supported by Council.

While the decision of Council was unfortunate, it was an important turning point in the development of partnerships that would build the collective capacity to withstand the pressures of the upcoming months. Representatives from the CRHA, the Expert Panel, Alberta Blue Cross, the Alberta Dental Association, the Alberta Dental Hygienists' Association and the seniors and First Nations communities, along with individual dentists, demonstrated shared ownership of the issue and began to work as a team.

The Plebiscite

There were about three months to prepare for the municipal election. It was clearly going to be a much different public education campaign than the one conducted in 1989, which included five years of preparation and an extensive action plan. Due to time constraints, it was decided that all aspects of the CRHA campaign would be coordinated through a Fluoride Education Steering Committee that included representatives from relevant divisions within the CRHA.

The three strategies that were agreed to included building partnerships, educating health professionals and educating the public.

Building Partnerships

Work had already begun on identifying and communicating with stakeholders and experts across North America on the issue. Locally, a network of professionals who were concerned about the possible loss of water fluoridation had been emerging. Endorsements for water fluoridation were solicited from the Canadian Dental Association, the Alberta Dental Association, the Alberta Dental Hygienists' Association, Calgary & District Dental Society, the Department of General Pediatric Consultants and pedi-



Fig. 1: CRHA's primary message.

atric dentists at the Alberta Children's Hospital.

Educating Health Professionals

Even before the announcement of the plebiscite, contingency activities had begun to prepare for education initiatives. In January 1998, the CRHA began collecting the most current fluoride research documents for compiling in a fluoride reference manual. The manual took four months to complete and contained over 90 questions related to water fluoridation. It became the foundation for the education not only of health professionals, but of the public as well.

Inservice education sessions were presented to CRHA staff who would be involved in public education and health profession groups in the community.

Fluoridation articles and information sheets were included in newsletters targeting dentists, dental hygienists, physicians, dietitians and CRHA staff. Health professionals were also invited to use the CRHA Fluoride Information Line and the CRHA's fluoridation Web site and to read the expert panel report.

Educating the Public

In March of 1998, two focus groups were held with representatives of the general public to gain a better understanding of their beliefs and concerns related to

water fluoridation. The qualitative information obtained from the focus groups was used to refine the public education materials.

Print materials. The slogan "Fluoridation: Nature thought of it first" and the logo of a water drop were selected as part of the CRHA's primary message to the public to promote water fluoridation (Fig. 1). These were adapted from a campaign developed by the American Dental Association with their permission.

A pamphlet, a small poster, a large poster, stickers and information sheets for senior citizens were the print materials used to support public education. They were distributed to the public through CRHA district offices, dental clinics, hospitals, long-term care facilities and seniors' influenza vaccine clinics. Pamphlets and large posters were distributed at continuing education sessions attended by dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants and pediatricians. These health professionals were encouraged to use the resources to promote water fluoridation in their workplaces.

The Fluoride Information Line. The Fluoride Information Line was created as an extension of the CRHA Information Line to answer any questions the public had about the fluoridation issue. The line was in operation from July to October 1998.

The fluoridation Web site. There was little accurate fluoride information on the Internet. A fluoride Web site was developed so that information would be available to the public and to CRHA staff. The site was set up in a question-and-answer format, and questions could also be submitted by e-mail to the Fluoride Information Line.

Social marketing campaign. The social marketing campaign ran for four weeks and began with a media launch on September 21. The messages incorporated into the campaign reinforced the natural theme used in the print materials and emphasized the safety, effectiveness and economy of

water fluoridation. The messages were on television, radio, newspaper and outdoor billboards.

Media coverage. Dr. Brent Friesen, Medical Officer of Health, was designated as the spokesperson on fluoridation for the CRHA. Scheduled news conferences during the campaign were well attended by television, radio and newspaper reporters. Dr. Friesen also responded to numerous requests for interviews and for participation in call-in shows throughout the campaign, often responding to information being distributed by those opposed to water fluoridation. Mid-way through the campaign, editorial board meetings were scheduled with the two newspapers to inform them more fully on the issue.

The CRHA participated in one public debate. Experience in this debate was similar to that reported in other jurisdictions during fluoride campaigns. The debate required a great deal of preparation, and the vast majority of people attending already held very firm opinions about the issue. A decision was made not to engage in any further public debates.

Anti-fluoridation Activities

There were two vocal anti-fluoridation groups active in Calgary during this period: the Health Action Network Society (HANS) and Calgarians for Choice. Indeed, HANS had started the process that led to the plebiscite: On May 7, 1997, HANS had presented a request to Council to hold a fluoridation plebiscite during the next municipal election.

Importing "Experts"

HANS brought three well-known opponents of water fluoridation to Calgary: Dr. John Colquhoun of New Zealand, Dr. John Lee of California and Dr. Richard Foulkes of British Columbia. Dr. Foulkes presented to City Council in July. Dr. Colquhoun spoke to the media and presented at a public information session in

August. Dr. Lee held a press conference and attempted to engage the CRHA in a public debate just before the election. Their impact on the campaign was perceived to be minimal because of poor timing (July and August). In addition, the material discussed by the three individuals consisted of arguments and claims familiar to the health community.

Media Coverage

The anti-fluoridation groups were successful in attracting media attention throughout the campaign. There were guest editorials printed in the two newspapers and numerous letters to the editor. Columns on fluoridation always contained allegations of negative health effects caused by water fluoridation. There is no doubt that this coverage raised concerns and confusion about the benefits of water fluoridation among the population. The anti-fluoridation groups were able to receive the majority of coverage in many of the newspaper articles. In addition, a few paid advertisements were inserted in newspapers urging voters to vote "no" to fluoridation.

The launch of the CRHA social marketing campaign was accompanied by a loud reaction from the groups opposed to fluoridation. They expressed outrage that CRHA was spending taxpayers' dollars to promote only one side of the issue, picketed the location of the news conference and attempted to disrupt it.

Print Materials

HANS distributed a pamphlet that included misinformation, statistical manipulations, innuendoes and quotes taken out of context. These pamphlets were circulated widely throughout the city.

The main focus of their information was that fluoride is a hazardous toxic waste that causes harmful health effects. Each allegation presented in their print materials was investigated by CRHA staff, and a 13-page report was written refuting the claims. A



portion of this report was published in a point-counterpoint column of the newspaper.

Legal Action

In mid-September a small group of individuals opposed to water fluoridation attempted, unsuccessfully, to file an injunction against the CRHA to stop all public education activities.

Conclusions

Calgarians voted 55 per cent in favour of continuing fluoridation of the municipal water supply. To prevent the occurrence of a future fluoridation plebiscite, CRHA should regularly review the fluoride research and promote the benefits of water fluoridation. There will be continued challenges by those who oppose water fluoridation, and CRHA must remain committed to this recognized public health measure.

Further information and details about the CRHA's experience can be obtained by e-mail at cathy.pryce@crha-health.ab.ca or by phone at (403) 209-8484. ■

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***Ms. Pryce** is leader, *Healthy Public Policy*, at the Calgary Regional Health Authority.*

***Ms. Smorang** works as a health promotion consultant and has participated in two water fluoridation campaigns in Calgary, in 1989 and 1998.*

***Reprint requests to:** Ms. Catherine Pryce, CRHA, 1035, 7th Ave. S.W., Calgary AB T2P 3E9*

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1. Expert Panel for Water Fluoridation Review. Executive Summary, Report of the Expert Panel For Water Fluoridation Review, 1998.

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