



PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION
of Australia Inc
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Mrs J Hancox
Email: jacquihancox@msn.com

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Dear Mrs Hancox

With regard to your questions emailed to Ms Helen Clifford (Oral Health Special Interest Group Chair) regarding letter sent by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) to the Premier of Queensland in relation to water fluoridation.

The overwhelming weight of scientific evidence supports water fluoridation as a safe and effective way to help reduce tooth decay.^{1,2,3} The cost effectiveness of water fluoridation has been studied extensively, with water fluoridation established as a highly cost-effective public health measure. The World Health Organisation recognises water fluoridation as one of the most cost effective means of delivering fluoride to a large number of individuals. Over the past 25 years, water fluoridation is estimated to have resulted in benefits to the Victorian community of around \$1 billion, through avoided dental costs and saved work and leisure time.

The Australian Child Dental Health Survey 1999 shows Queensland children experience more tooth decay than children from any other state or territory.

Your suggestion that the PHAA wants to “take the power away from local authorities that can allow citizens a referendum to indicate consent” is in contrast to the PHAA’s suggestion to the Premier that the burden of decision making should not be forced on local governments and citizens when there is a clear need for expert involvement. Research has shown that in terms of making decisions about water fluoridation the public expect experts to carry the burden of decision making.⁴ The PHAA supports water fluoridation decision making responsibility being undertaken by Health Authorities as such authorities have a responsibility to review and assess health evidence in relation to the benefit and risks associated with such public health measures and to make decisions that balance the best possible community health outcomes with individual choices. In 2004, all Australian Health Ministers endorsed

¹ National Health and Medical Research Council 1999 *Review of water fluoridation and fluoride intake from discretionary fluoride supplements* (vii)

² NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, University of York 2000. *A systematic review of public water fluoridation*.

³ Catherine Stillman-Lowe (ed) 2004 *One in a million, the facts about water fluoridation* 2nd Ed. The British Fluoridation Society, The UK Public Health Association, The British Dental Association, The Faculty of Public Health.

⁴ Lowry B, Thompson B and Lennon M 2000. How much do the general public want to be involved in decisions on implementing water fluoridation? *British Dental Journal* 188(9):500-502.

water fluoridation as a national oral health initiative in Healthy Mouths Healthy Lives: Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2004-2013.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is Australia's peak health body for the achievement of the best possible standards for individual and public health. To be acceptable to the NHMRC, any chemical added to drinking water must not be toxic when ingested at the recommended maximum concentration in drinking water. The NHMRC *Australian Drinking Water Guidelines* (the Guidelines) provide health-based guideline values for microbial, chemical and radiological quality of drinking water. Health-related guideline values are based on World Health Organization recommendations and are designed to protect human health. The Guidelines are available online at <http://www7.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/synopses/eh19syn.htm>.

The NHMRC recommends three compounds for fluoridating drinking water: sodium fluoride, sodium silicofluoride and fluorosilicic acid. These fluoride compounds are added to water supplies in a controlled manner and dissociate in water to form fluoride ions, the same way that fluoride compounds such as calcium fluoride dissolve out of rocks as a result of water passing over them. As fluorides are abundant in the earth's crust, the fluoride used for fluoridating drinking water is obtained from fluoride-containing rock. The production process used to collect fluoride from rock is an appropriate use of natural resources.

*"In considering the ethics of fluoridation...(you)...should ask not are we entitled to impose fluoridation on unwilling people, but are the unwilling people entitled to impose the risks, damage and costs of failure to fluoridate on the community at large."*⁵ Water fluoridation is not mass medication as fluoride occurs naturally in all water supplies to some degree. A fortification of fluoride levels to achieve oral health benefit does not prevent individuals from making a choice to remove or avoid fluoridated water through the use of filters or bottled water.

The Public Health Association of Australia thanks you for your enquiry and hope that the information provided assists with your understanding of the PHAA's evidence base for supporting water fluoridation as a safe and effective public health measure.

Yours faithfully

Pieta - Ros. Laut

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⁵ Professor John Harris, Centre for Social Ethics and Policy, University of Manchester 1998 in Water Fluoridation helps to protect teeth throughout life, State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services 2004