

What MPs and Peers say about water fluoridation and dental health

In 2003, Parliament debated proposals to remove the ambiguity of previous legislation about who has the final say on whether or not fluoride should be added to water to reduce tooth decay - the NHS or the water industry.

The matter was finally resolved on 10th November 2003, when the House of Commons approved a new Water Act which places the statutory responsibility with Strategic Health Authorities. MPs voted by 284 to 181 in favour of fluoridation. Peers supported it by 153 votes to 31.

Here, in this briefing, we highlight some of the comments made by MPs and Peers during the Parliamentary debates.



The general principle

Lord Whitty, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural



Affairs. Former General Secretary of the Labour Party:

"From a public health perspective, water fluoridation is the delivery method of choice to bring about population improvements in dental health and should be considered locally when it is desired to reduce inequalities in levels of dental decay."

The Lord Bishop of Newcastle:

"I cannot think of another measure that could be introduced so economically and yet produce such a health gain for so many. The cost of not fluoridating is paid for by the continued



suffering and poor dental health of some of the vulnerable groups in our society. I am left asking why a child born in a poor family in Birmingham or Newcastle should be able to receive the benefits of fluoridation but not one born in similar circumstances in the city of Bradford."



Sir Paul Beresford (Con), MP for Mole Valley. Minister at Dept of the Environment 1994-97.

Dentist by profession:

"A dentist in New Zealand told me that before fluoridation, filling teeth heroically was like trying to fill a bath with the plug out - it was hopeless. When fluoridation arrived, that changed."

Andy Burnham (Lab), MP for Leigh. Member of Commons Health Select Committee 2001-03:

"Water fluoridation has been shown to improve the dental health of an entire population, cutting needless suffering and improving people's quality of life."



The dental benefits

Lord Turnberg, President of the Royal College of Physicians 1992-97:

"There does not seem to be any doubt that areas of the country where fluoride has been introduced have, by and large, reduced the incidence of caries. Where fluoride has been withdrawn - as it has been in one or two places - the incidence has risen."



Dr Brian Iddon (Lab), MP for Bolton South East. Former Bolton councillor and university lecturer in chemistry:



"It is shameful that there are so many children in Britain with such poor dental health that some as young as two or three have to have teeth out."

Lord King of West Bromwich, Sandwell councillor and former teacher:

"The addition of fluoride into water supplies could dramatically reduce the level of tooth decay and give children a decent and pain-free start in life Water fluoridation delivers greater reductions in decay than toothpaste and other techniques and



reaches the whole population rather than only those who adhere to a regular cleaning regime using fluoride toothpaste. It is also quite a cheap method."

Lord Chan, former consultant paediatrician and member of the Commission for Health Improvement:

"Up until 1989, children in Huddersfield had the benefit of fluoridated water.... One study showed that three year olds in Huddersfield had less than half as much tooth decay as children in non-fluoridated but otherwise similar areas such as Dewsbury. Today, children in Huddersfield no longer have the benefit of fluoride in water. As a result, according to dentists, the average number of decayed teeth in children under 5 is 4.6, a definite increase."

Baroness Cumberlege, Health Minister in the Lords 1992-97, former chair of the National Association of Health Authorities and current vice-president of the Royal College of Nursing:



In the 1990s, Dudley's water was fluoridated In Stourbridge (the most affluent area), whose water was not treated, the number of children free from tooth decay dropped, whereas in the centre of Dudley, where the water was fluoridated, the proportion rose. The turnaround was very dramatic. Children in the most deprived part of the borough now have better teeth than those in the least deprived part."

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, Health Minister in the Lords 1999-2003 and former chief executive of the NHS Confederation:



"The public health dentistry programme in Birmingham and in the Black Country is probably one of the most progressive in the country as a whole. The fact that it has taken a proactive role in promoting fluoridation indicates that it is dedicated to the dental health of children."

The safety

Miss Melanie Johnson, MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health:

“Let me say in the strongest possible terms that there is no evidence of any harm to overall health from fluoride.....More than 6 million people in the West Midlands and North East already receive fluoridated water, and there is no evidence of harm to overall health as a result. That is backed up by evidence from many countries around the world.”



Baroness Gardner of Parkes, former dentist and hospital trust chairman: “If there was a serious health risk, I believe that a pattern would have shown up. People living in those fluoridated communities would be showing a different health pattern from those not living in a fluoridated area. The one significant difference is the state of their teeth.”



Lord Warner, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health:

“The water industry is used to dealing with water treatment processes safely to ensure that dosing is strictly controlled within the target concentrations.”



Sir Paul Beresford, MP:

“Research on the subject in the past few decades has been enormous. Fluoride occurs naturally in many water supplies throughout the world, so there has been a great opportunity to look into its effects.”



Lord Rea, former research fellow in paediatrics, lecturer in social medicine and GP:

“The fluoride used is the chemical salt of a naturally occurring element - fluorine - which is present at a higher level than one part per million in the ground water of some areas of the country, the best known being the area around Hartlepool, with no demonstrable adverse effects on health other than the minor cosmetic effect of dental fluorosis among a small proportion of the population. Exactly the same applies to fluoridated areas of the country, particularly Birmingham.”

Dr Nick Palmer (Lab), MP for Broxtowe:

“The York review and the MRC's comments suggest that there is no good reason to believe that fluoride is harmful to health.”



Lord Fowler, Secretary of State for Social Services 1981-87:

“The good to be done outweighs any argument of individual liberty.”



The ethics

Lord Colwyn, practising dentist:

“Is it morally acceptable to allow children to suffer the pain and discomfort of decayed teeth and allow them to experience the trauma of tooth extraction, sometimes under general anaesthetic, when we know of a simple way of adjusting the concentration of a naturally occurring element that goes a long way to alleviating these problems?”



Lord Turnberg:

“Children with caries often require a general anaesthetic for treatment. While general anaesthetic for children is fairly safe, there are clearly determined risks. Every so often one reads of a disaster from dental anaesthesia. So preventing even the rare occurrences alone seems a valuable, worthwhile aim.”



The Lord Bishop of Newcastle:

“Dental health in Birmingham is among the best in the country. That means significantly less pain from toothache and abscesses; fewer days lost from school and work; and less need for emergency dental treatment. But in other parts of the country tooth decay remains an intransigent public health problem, and it is very strongly associated with child poverty.”



Public opinion

Robert Key (Con), MP for Salisbury. Shadow Minister for Environment and Transport. Former member of Medical Research Council: “An NOP survey found that 67 per cent of people in Britain think that fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay, with 22 per cent saying no. The same survey found that 42 per cent of people think that fluoride is added to water already, when the real figure is that about 10 per cent have fluoridated water.”



Around the world

Miss Melanie Johnson, MP:

“There are many countries in the world, as well as the UK, where fluoridation has been happening for a long time.... In the United States, 64 per cent of the population receives fluoridated water. About 6 million UK residents drink water with fluoride in it.”



Implementing the Water Act 2004

Lord Warner:

“Strategic health authorities with high levels of dental decay in their population are likely to be attracted by long-term savings in dental treatment offered by fluoridation.”

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