

## Key points

- The World Health Organisation, the UK Health Departments, the Royal College of Physicians, the US Public Health Service and many other medical and scientific organisations endorse fluoridation as a safe and beneficial public health measure.
- Independent opinion surveys carried out recently show that the vast majority of people in the UK think fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay. Many are wrongly under the impression they are already benefiting from fluoridated water when, in reality, they are not.



The Royal College of Physicians  
and the British Dental Association  
support water fluoridation

## Public and professional support

In the UK, national opinion surveys conducted by NOP and Gallup consistently show that around 70% of the public believe that fluoride should be added to water supplies to prevent tooth decay. Furthermore, statutory local consultations conducted by over 60 health authorities have demonstrated a high level of public support [1].

An Alliance of over 100 top scientific medical and voluntary organisations – including the British Medical Association, the British Dental Association, MENCAP, the Patients Association, several NHS bodies and local authorities – endorses fluoridation and is campaigning for the rights of communities to choose fluoridation, and to have their wishes implemented.

Worldwide, every major health body that has considered the evidence have confirmed the effectiveness of water fluoridation and found no evidence of harm. Such bodies include expert working groups or committees of the World Health Organisation, the Royal College of Physicians, the US National Academy of Sciences, the Medical Research Council and several governments – including UK, US, Australia, New Zealand. (See Section 4 of this report for more detail.)

This combination of strong professional and public support for fluoridation is a powerful argument for ensuring that, where it is feasible and cost-effective,

water supplies in the UK should have their natural fluoride content adjusted to the optimum level of one part per million.

## Royal College of Physicians

Since the 1960s, the merits of fluoridation have been considered by many professional bodies concerned with the health and well-being of the UK population. Notably, the Royal College of Physicians undertook a thorough appraisal of all aspects of fluoridation. Its report *Fluoride, Teeth and Health*, published in 1976 [2], included the following unambiguous endorsement:

*'The College recommends fluoridation of water supplies in the United Kingdom where the fluoride level is appreciably below 1 mg per litre.'*

The College has not had cause to change this view.

## Other medical, dental and scientific bodies

Organisations which have either publicly recommended fluoridation, or have issued statements confirming its safety and effectiveness, include:

- UK Departments of Health
- US Public Health Service
- The Royal College of Physicians
- The Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians
- The Royal College of Surgeons of England
- The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh

- The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- The Royal College of Nursing
- The Royal College of General Practitioners
- The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow
- The Royal Society for the Promotion of Health
- UK Public Health Association
- Help the Aged
- The Patients Association
- MENCAP
- The National Autistic Society
- National Children's Bureau
- The British Medical Association
- The British Dental Association
- The British Association for Community Child Health
- The British Society of Dentistry for Disability & Oral Health
- The British Society of Gerodontology
- Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association
- General Dental Council
- Society of Community Medicine
- The British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry
- British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology
- American Dental Association
- FDI World Dental Federation

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the many organisations worldwide that support water fluoridation; however from this selection it can be seen that there is an overwhelming mass of professional opinion in favour of fluoridation. Indeed, very few other health promotion measures enjoy such a level of support.

#### *The World Health Organisation*

At the highest international levels of health policy-making, the World Health Organisation continues to support water fluoridation where it would be practicable to introduce it. The World Health Assembly passed the latest of three fluoride resolutions in 1978, and it remains in force today. It requests the Director-General to:

*'continue to provide technical advice and assistance to Member States in the prevention and control of dental caries by the adjustment of the fluoride content of public water supplies to the optimal level.'* [3]

Subsequently the World Health Organisation has published technical guidance that recommends: *'Community water fluoridation is*

*safe and cost-effective and should be introduced and maintained wherever it is socially acceptable and feasible.'* [4]

#### *Support in Parliament*

In 1985 Members of Parliament voted in favour of the Water (Fluoridation) Bill to give health authorities the legal power to improve dental health by water fluoridation.

Introducing the Bill the Minister for Health, Kenneth Clarke, stated that the evidence of effectiveness and safety had been followed for years in some areas and said:

*'About 5 million people, including my own family, drink water where the fluoride content has been artificially increased to the optimum recommended level of 1 part per million.'*

The Bill received broad cross-party support.

The Opposition Spokesman on Health, Michael Meacher, said:

*'The great advantage of fluoridation is that it benefits most the poorest and the ill-informed – those who are not reached by other initiatives ... How can one justify not giving the child who lives in Wolverhampton or Salford the same protection against tooth decay as the child who lives in Birmingham or Watford already enjoys?'*

The Liberals spokesman on health, Michael Meadowcroft, also strongly supported the Bill, drawing on the evidence of Birmingham during the previous 20 years:

*'dental decay has been reduced dramatically ... the number of children attending for relief of toothache dropped ... children supplied with false teeth 12 times lower.'*

Following much debate, on 5th March 1985 the Bill received its Third Reading. Members of Parliament voted 2 to 1 in favour of the Bill which became law on 30th October 1985.

#### *The All Party Parliamentary Primary Care and Public Health Group Inquiry into Water Fluoridation*

In March 2003 the All Party Parliamentary Primary Care and Public Health Group published a report of its Inquiry into Water Fluoridation. The All-Party Group chose to investigate issues surrounding the fluoridation of public water supplies in the UK following the Medical Research Council report but before the Government had formally responded to it. The All Party Group

report was submitted to Ministers with the intention of influencing future fluoridation policy.

The All-Party Group report endorsed the effectiveness and safety of water fluoridation, and rejected the 'civil liberties' argument against it. The Group recommended that:

- Dental health policy should recognise targeted water fluoridation as a legitimate and effective means of tackling dental health inequalities; and that
- Legislation should be amended to allow the responsible health body, after public consultation has demonstrated strong local support, to require water companies to fluoridate as directed.

Support for fluoridation among backbench MPs in Parliament is as strong as ever. During the 2003 parliamentary session 149 MPs from all parties signed an Early Day Motion supporting fluoridation. Furthermore, following a massive 5 to 1 Lords vote in support of fluoridation, in November 2003, in a free vote, MPs voted 2 to 1 to support a Government amendment to the Water Bill to correct flawed legislation that had dogged health authorities' attempts to implement fluoridation for almost 20 years.

### *Support from local councils*

Until 1974 local councils were responsible for both public health and water supplies, and it was local councils who were responsible for implementing practically all of the fluoridation schemes in operation in the UK today. With the support of local councils, in 1955 and 1956 three demonstration projects (controlled studies) were established in Watford (England), Kilmarnock (Scotland), and Anglesey (Wales). After publication of the first evaluation report in 1962 [5], many councils serving large urban populations – including Birmingham and Newcastle City Councils started fluoridating their water supplies.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s many local councils actively supported health authorities proposals for water fluoridation. In the North West, North East and West Midlands of England the majority of local councils consulted by health authorities supported fluoridation proposals. The councils of several major cities and towns – including Manchester, Salford, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Durham, Gateshead, Kirklees, Leeds, Newcastle, Birmingham, Coventry, Sandwell,

and Worcester are long-standing supporters of water fluoridation. Several are members of the National Alliance for Equity in Dental Health.

### *Support from the public*

Before the early 1980s little systematic public opinion research had been conducted in the UK on the subject of fluoridation. It was therefore difficult to know whether the public generally supported it or not. All that changed, however, in 1980 when the West Midlands Regional Health Authority commissioned a leading independent research company - NOP - to undertake a nationwide survey. NOP asked a demographically representative sample of people in over 170 parliamentary constituencies whether they thought fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay. The results were as follows:

*Yes - 66%*

*No - 16%*

*Don't know - 18%*

### *Support across all parts of the country and all social groups*

For the first time, health authorities had incontrovertible evidence that two thirds of the population wanted fluoride added to their water supplies to prevent tooth decay. Not only that – the NOP survey showed clearly that there was a large majority in favour of fluoridation in all regions of England and in Scotland and Wales.

Some opponents of fluoridation attacked the wording of the question, claiming that it was biased because it asked people to say whether they would support fluoridation *if it reduced tooth decay*. The reduction of tooth decay should not have been mentioned, they claimed. However, those who framed the survey argued strongly that it would have been justifiable to have gone further and use the word *because*, and not simply *if* – on the grounds that it is an established scientific fact that fluoridation does reduce tooth decay.

Moreover, they stressed that the issue of tooth decay had to be incorporated within the question because that is what fluoridation is for. How could someone say whether or not he or she supported a health policy without being told the purpose of it? Common sense dictated that if respondents to the survey objected to the idea (either on ideological grounds or because they mistakenly believed it would cause harm to other organs of the body), they would say that they opposed it, whether or not it reduced tooth decay.

### Support remains high

Since the first nationwide public opinion survey on fluoridation in 1980, more surveys have been carried out. In 1985 and 1987 the National Association of Health Authorities commissioned Gallup to find out how public opinion was changing in the light of increased publicity on the issue. Both surveys revealed a steadily rising level of support for fluoridation:

- 1985 survey by Gallup for NAHA

*Do you think fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay?*

Yes - 71%

No - 17%

Don't know - 11 %

- 1987 survey by Gallup for NAHA

*Do you think fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay?*

Yes - 76%

No - 15%

Don't know - 9%

- 1992 NOP nationwide survey - highest ever level of support

In May 1992 the British Fluoridation Society commissioned NOP to conduct a nationwide survey was conducted. NOP used the same basic set of questions as the three previous surveys in face-to-face interviews with a randomly selected sample of people across England, Scotland and Wales. This time the results were:

Yes - 79%

No - 15%

Don't know - 6%

These figures show the highest ever level of public support for fluoridation.

In 1997 NOP carried out a further opinion poll for the British Fluoridation Society which showed a slight fall from the very high level of support in 1992. This is not surprising given the continued vigorous national campaigning of organisations opposed to fluoridation. However, it is clear that the majority (around two thirds) of the public continue to support fluoridation.

- 1997 survey by NOP for the British Fluoridation Society

*Do you think fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay?*

Yes - 69%

No - 18%

Don't know - 13%

- 2003 survey by NOP for the British Fluoridation Society

*Do you think fluoride should be added to water if it can reduce tooth decay?*

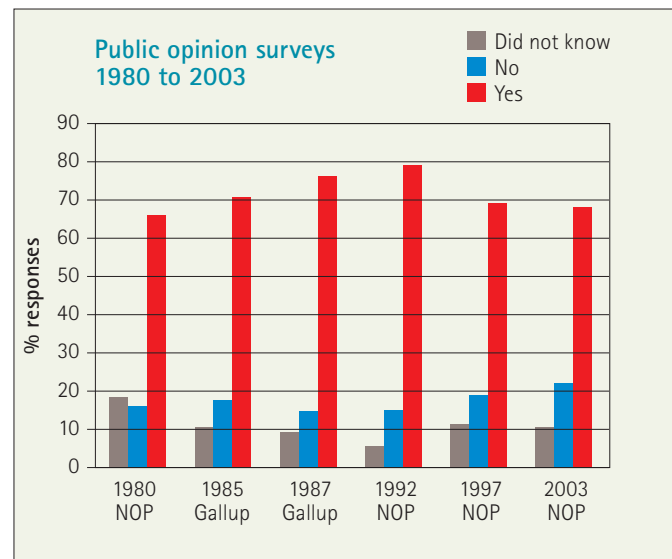
Yes - 67%

No - 22%

Don't know - 11%

What is clear from all of these surveys of public opinion over almost 20 years is that consistently at least two thirds of the British public support water fluoridation.

Figure 1



Few, if any, public health issues have been subjected to such extensive opinion research at national level. All the evidence is that the majority of people support water fluoridation as a means of preventing tooth decay on a community-wide basis.

### More people think their water is fluoridated than is actually the case

In 1988 the number of people in the UK estimated to be drinking fluoridated water was around 6 million [6] - one in every nine people in the country. What opinion research reveals, however, is that many more people think their water is fluoridated even though it is not.

In the 1992 NOP survey, and again in the 2003 survey over 40% of those interviewed thought they were already receiving fluoridated water, compared with 11% or thereabouts who were actually receiving it. This suggests a gap between public expectations on the one hand and what health authorities have been able to achieve on the other.

*Most people do not realise that fluoride is present naturally in water*

Unlike many of the other substances that are added to water to make it fit to drink, fluoride is present naturally in all water supplies. In fact, in some places it occurs in sufficient concentrations - one part of fluoride per million parts of water - to prevent tooth decay. Hartlepool in the North East of England, for example, has benefited for generations from adequate natural levels of fluoride in water. This is reflected in its children's dental health which is amongst the best in the country.

The existence of natural fluoride in water was how scientists first discovered the link between fluoride and dental health. However, surveys suggest that most people do not realise that fluoride is a natural constituent of water and that fluoridation is simply the process of topping up something which is already there rather than adding something which is ordinarily absent. In the 1992 and 2003 NOP surveys, only around 30% said (correctly) that there was natural fluoride in water, while around 35% of the sample of adults questioned thought there was no fluoride present naturally in water the remaining 35% said they did not know.

### *References*

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6. Bickley SR, Lennon MA, (1989): Fluoride levels in water supplies in health districts in England and Wales. A survey conducted by the British Fluoridation Society in 1988. *Community Dental Health*, 6: 403-413.