



February 2001
Briefing

Water Fluoridation

Issued by the British Dental Association on behalf of the National Alliance for Equity in Dental Health

Water fluoridation is one of the best ways to ensure our children grow up with strong healthy teeth. In Birmingham, where the water has been fluoridated for almost 40 years, children's teeth are three times healthier than those of children living in Manchester, where the water is not fluoridated.

Worldwide, fluoridation is recognised as the single most effective public health measure to reduce tooth decay and improve oral health. In the United States, 43 of the 50 largest cities use fluoridated water, and South Africa has recently paved the way for fluoridation of all its water supplies.

It was against this backdrop that the Government commissioned the University of York's NHS Centre for Reviews & Dissemination to carry out an investigation into fluoridation, the results of which were announced in October. The Review confirmed that fluoridation helps to reduce tooth decay, and is particularly helpful in areas where overall health is lower than average.

The BDA is concerned at the York Review's conclusions that there is not enough high quality, up-to-date evidence available, as, without it, the debate cannot move forward. The York Review highlighted deficiencies by today's standard in the quality of the research evidence available. Much of the research evaluated by York was conducted many years ago and to a standard that was acceptable at the time. However, by today's gold standard the quality of much of that evidence is judged to be low to moderate.

The BDA recognises that this evidence base needs to be strengthened to bring it up to today's gold standard. The Government has asked the Medical Research Council to explore how any further research could most productively be focussed in order to strengthen the knowledge base concerning water fluoridation and its effects on health.

The Association wants the Government to use innovation through fluoridation research projects in communities where oral health is at its worst and where there is local consent. It is only through projects such as these that the benefits of fluoride in water can be measured against other ways of improving oral health, such as fluoride toothpaste.

Because of a loophole in the 1985 Water (Fluoridation) Act, which was intended to enable community decisions about fluoridation, it is water companies, not communities, who have the final say on local fluoridation proposals, a position which is seriously flawed.

The National Alliance for Equity in Dental Health, a consortium of more than 40 organisations - including the British Dental Association and the British Medical Association - which campaigns for fluoridation where oral health levels are poor, is now pressing the Government to fulfil its 1999 pledge to introduce a legal obligation on water companies to fluoridate after consultation.

At present, only around 10% of the UK's population drink fluoridated water. The BDA would like to see this increased to 30%, with areas where tooth decay is more prevalent, such as the North of England, West of Scotland and Inner London, being targeted.

The BDA believes that targeted water fluoridation would greatly improve the public health of the nation and provides both an effective clinical and financial way of reducing oral health inequalities.

For further information on this and other issues, please contact the BDA Press & Parliamentary Department 020 7563 4580.