

Dentist 'disappointed' over Waterloo fluoride decision

BY JEFF OUTHIT, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO REGION — Waterloo will stop adding fluoride to tap water at noon Nov. 29.

Regional councillors voted Tuesday to end the longtime public health practice, after critics asked that it be stopped and residents voted 50.3 per cent against it last month.

Fluoride has been added to Waterloo drinking water since 1967 as a way to strengthen tooth enamel and prevent cavities. It is not added to water in Kitchener or Cambridge.

Dentists who support fluoridation failed to persuade councillors to overlook a referendum the Yes side lost by just 195 votes out of 30,727 ballots cast.

Dr. Sanjay Uppal argued that councillors are responsible for public health decisions. He pointed out the referendum is not binding. He complained that turnout, falling short of 50 per cent, was dampened by a process that lacked clarity.

"I'm disappointed," he said, calling the referendum a straw poll. "It doesn't seem right."

Chair Ken Seiling responded by criticizing the Yes campaign undertaken by dentists, pointing out that unlike the No campaign, dentists did not deliver pro-fluoride brochures to all doorsteps.

"My question to you is: Where were you?" said Seiling, a fluoridation supporter.

"We just didn't have the financing," said Uppal, president of the Waterloo-Wellington Dental Society.

Regional council has the power to start or stop fluoridation. But in 2008, politicians chose to order a referendum that was disliked by both the Yes and No sides. Council pledged to respect the simple majority vote and no councillor broke that pledge Tuesday.

"Our word and our honour has to prevail," said Coun. Sean Strickland, of Waterloo.

Elmira, St. Jacobs and a small part of Kitchener will also shed fluoride.

"It's both good and appropriate to implement the democratic will of the voters," said Robert Fleming, a Waterloo resident who helped lead the winning No campaign.

Council intends to confirm its bylaw to end fluoridation Nov. 24. The practice will shut down five days later at four water treatment sites.

Medical officer of health Dr. Liana Nolan, a fluoridation supporter, said the public health department plans to fight tooth decay by targeting at-risk population groups.

Dentists warn that cavities and public health costs will rise and that low-income children are at special risk. Critics dispute assertions that fluoridation, common in Ontario, is safe and effective.

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