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## Leadership expected in fluoridation debate

**BY LUISA D'AMATO**

If you worry about what they put in hot dogs, you don't have to eat them.

You don't have to drink milk either, or eat Great Lakes fish, or consume sweets loaded with refined sugar and food colouring if you think those things are bad for you and your family.

But tap water? Well, that's different. We must have water. We all pay for municipal water, whether we drink it or not. We demand higher standards of purity from our tap water than from any other drink or food, and that's quite right.

And perhaps that's why there's such passionate debate about whether Waterloo should continue to fluoridate its tap water.

The issue is up before Waterloo voters on municipal election day. If I had my way, it would also be something that voters in Kitchener and Cambridge — who don't have fluoridated water — would have the right to decide, too.

The weight of expert opinion makes this an easy decision.

Fluoridation of drinking water, if it's done properly, protects people from the misery, expense and health hazard of tooth decay.

It especially protects adults and children from low-income homes, who have less access to good dental care in general and are therefore more at risk.

And according to decades of research, there are no adverse health effects associated with fluoridated water, which is now routine for 70 per cent of Ontario residents.

Respected organizations such as the U.S. Centre for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, the Canadian Paediatric Society, Health Canada, and the Ontario Dental Association all agree on this.

So what's the problem? Why not put in this micro-nutrient that seems to do so much good? Why is there even a debate?

The critics — and many of them are well educated, reasonable people — are still skeptical. They are concerned about the possibilities of tiny amounts — too small to be measured — of toxic elements such as arsenic and lead that may be added along with the hydrofluorosilicic acid, which breaks down into fluoride when added to water.

They have other concerns, too.

And it's important not to dismiss their concerns out of hand. Human history is full of episodes where the authorities told us a medicine or a chemical was safe, only to find out later that they were horribly, tragically, wrong.

Remember thalidomide, the drug that pregnant women took to avoid morning sickness that gave them deformed babies? How about asbestos, the material that was blithely used to insulate buildings and numerous other purposes until — oops! — we found out it caused cancer?

People in a community have a right to the best possible public health measures. At the same time, there is an argument to be made that people who believe that fluoride is harmful should not have it imposed on them in the one place they can least avoid it: their drinking water.

Perhaps the best solution would be to fluoridate the water, then offer citizens with deep objections some kind of financial assistance in obtaining a reverse-osmosis system that would remove the fluoride from their water.

In any case, sorting out the rights of these two different groups is something each Waterloo citizen must do. It's a very important job, a very difficult one, and one on which citizens have a right to look to their leaders.

And that's why it's so disappointing to see two candidates for Waterloo mayor, Dale Ross and Brenda Halloran, decline to provide any assistance.

The other two candidates, Franklin Ramsoomair and Jan d'Ailly, state that their personal positions are not to fluoridate. D'Ailly says he believes it isn't necessary because there are plenty of opportunities to obtain fluoride, such as treatments from the dentist.

The Ontario Dental Association wouldn't agree with his view. But I give d'Ailly credit for taking a stand.

Halloran, on the other hand, won't give her opinion and has said it's a personal health issue.

She couldn't be more wrong about that.

Whether you brush your teeth once, twice, or three times a day is a personal health decision.

Whether you fluoridate the community water supply is clearly a public health decision. And one on which our citizens can expect leadership.

[ldamato@therecord.com](mailto:ldamato@therecord.com)

*This is one of a series of opinion columns on issues in the upcoming municipal election.*

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