

## Lots of questions need answering

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To fluoridate or not to fluoridate the water? That indeed will be the question.

City council last week agreed to hold a plebiscite on the issue. As a brief aside, I should point out that is the last time I will use the word "plebiscite." I shall call it a vote from now on. Why use a \$10 word, when a \$1 one will do the job?

Anyway, someone contacted me after the decision, and said I should be the voice of reason. I found this pretty amusing on a number of different levels. I am not often accused of being reasonable.

But it certainly was an issue I could grab hold of. We've been putting fluoride in the water for years. There's no evidence of any damage, and there are widespread benefits. Who are these whackos who want to put an end to it?

Then I started to think about it. Not just the issue of fluoridation, but some bigger questions, and I realized that initial reaction was a little bit too easy. And, like so many other problems, the answers are not always that simple. Right now, I don't have those answers. But I have a few questions.

First of all, I've done a significant amount of research and I haven't run across too much which makes me worry about the addition of fluoride to the water. Some 70 per cent of people in Ontario drink fluoridated water. And that's not my issue.

I have a couple of other concerns, which I believe are far more important to discuss than the scare campaigns being run by the groups that want to put an end to fluoridation.

Fluoridation began years ago in an effort to improve the population's dental health. I am wondering if that is still necessary.

Toothpaste now contains fluoride and applications are also available from dentists. Do we still need to add fluoride to the water based on that alone?

A lot of people don't have dentists, true enough, but do we get enough from toothpaste? I don't know the answer to that. But I'm pretty sure someone does, and it seems like a perfectly sensible thing to ask.

Is there some reason processes we began 40 years ago have to continue forever? Technology and improvements in a number of areas have changed the way we do many things. Perhaps this should be one of them? Again, I don't know, but it's an interesting thing to ponder.

I also wonder about something considerably deeper. Over the past 40 years there has been a dramatic shift, I think, in the way people view government and individual freedoms and choice.

If this was the first time around, would we, as a group, be inclined to agree to a plan to add something to the water no matter its benefits, if there was another way to access the same chemical? I have no idea how that would turn out. I don't even know how I would vote on such a proposal if it came to me now. But it is an interesting question. You'll have to answer that on your own.

And I have questions about the vote itself. The city will put the question on the ballot in the 2010 election.

Given that less than 30 per cent of voters will bother to cast ballots, does that not open up the result to a great deal of manipulation?

And if we're going to make a decision that impacts on absolutely everyone in the city, can we not find a better way to survey them?

Should the question be opened up to more people? Maybe people under 19 would like to have a say. Should they? How can we know the result will be a good barometer of exactly how people feel?

How will we know the information we get from either side will be accurate? We have people who vote now without being properly informed. How can we be sure people will take an interest? Do we assume that people who don't bother to vote don't care one way or the other?

It seems to me right now that in trying to get an answer to the fluoridation question, we're going to have to deal with a few other things first.

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