



Split decision

Neither side convincing in first of three fluoride debates

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The opposing sides of the water fluoridation question debated the science of fluoride last Thursday but no one delivered a knockout blow.

Instead the panelists' divergent interpretations of the science that exists left their respective messages muddled, suggesting no one quite pulled off a convincing victory. Perhaps the only real losers were those in the audience and watching the debate on Rogers TV still trying to figure which way to vote for the upcoming fluoride referendum on Oct. 25.

Dr. Ira Kershin, past president of the Ontario Dental Association, and president elect Dr. Harry Hoediono, a Waterloo dentist who has practiced dentistry in Kitchener for more than 20 years, promised to deliver facts and dispel some of the myths forwarded by anti-fluoridationists.

They said the latest research confirms the benefits of water fluoridation in reducing dental carries is especially effective in populations that might not normally practice good oral hygiene, especially the socioeconomically disadvantaged, children and seniors.

"With toothpaste, especially with young children, you have to wonder how much ends up in their mouth, how much ends up on the floor ... are they swallowing?" said Kershin. "We're not getting an exact amount.

"With water you know exactly what you're getting. It's simply the delivery system that is different."

They said they have the source science to prove that water fluoridation is safe and effective producing a thick red binder from Health Canada that was supposed to contain the latest evidence.

"This debate gives the illusion of scientific controversy even though the vast majority of health professionals and scientists support water fluoridation," said Hoediono.

"We have the science and during this debate we can negate every fact they give you to give you the truth."

But they made some confusing points about whether fluoride is a nutrient or a mineral, and weren't as clear about how fluoride works through the rest of the body on its way to remineralizing tooth enamel.

Paul Connett, who has a doctorate in chemistry and heads the Fluoride Action Network in the U. S., and Peter van Caulart, who trains water operators in Ontario, represented the anti-fluoridationist side of the argument.

They lent a little more gravitas to those opposed to water fluoridation with their expertise about the fundamental chemistry of hydrofluorosilic acid and some of the concerns surrounding its ingestion in the body.

They argued that the latest research says fluoride is most effective when it is applied topically than it does systemically when people receive it through their water.

"The idea that swallowing something that will purportedly have benefit in some part of the body but no other effects in other parts of the body is preposterous," said Van Caulart.

Connett made a strong point about dosing and the reality that there was no way to control for how much fluoride they ingest as anyone could drink as much fluoridated water as they want.

But that strong point was a bit lost when he brought up the fact that mother's milk has much lower levels of fluoride than found in the

water.

“A bottle-fed child could get 200 times more fluoride than being breastfed,” said Connett.

He suggested it's not as necessary an element as the Ontario Dental Association's representatives were suggesting. “How did nature screw up on this?” said Connett.

But Hoediono pointed out that's true of a bunch of other elements, including vitamin D, that could be based on diet or other factors.

The audience of more than 60 people in attendance was equally split on what points were important and what points just quibbling about the difference in interpretation.

Both groups pushed their respective websites for more information — www.youroralhealth.ca by the dentists, www.fluoridealert.org for the Fluoride Action Network — for more information.

There are two more debates tentatively scheduled for Rogers Channel 20 in the fall with Talk Back Live's Mike Farwell scheduled to host.

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