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## Waterloo fluoride debate is legitimate

THE RECORD

For 42 years the chemical fluoride has been added to Waterloo's drinking water supply even though a minority of citizens has always wanted the practice stopped. But despite a popular tendency to portray those fluoride critics as a fringe of alarmist eccentrics, there is a new body of research that suggests that, at the very least, fluoridation deserves a full public airing and debate.

Just this week, a study commissioned by Health Canada concluded that there are risks to fluoride exposure, particularly to children. Worried that kids might be getting too much of the chemical, the expert panel recommended that fluoride levels in drinking water should be reduced to 0.7 parts per million from the current guidelines that allow a range of 0.8 parts per million to one part per million. The panel also wants the government to encourage the use of low-fluoride toothpaste by children and have makers of infant formula reduce levels in their products.

Now, it should be clear from the start that this panel did not advocate an end to the artificial fluoridation of water.

It should be clear that the Waterloo Region's medical health officer, Liana Nolan, says residents of Waterloo and Woolwich Township -- the only communities in the region that have fluoride added to their water -- have nothing to worry about. Those fluoride levels meet provincial standards and are essentially in line with what the expert panel recommended.

It should also be clear that the Ontario Dental Association, the Canadian Dental Association, the Centre for Disease Control in the United States and the U.S. Surgeon General all currently support the fluoridation of municipal drinking water.

But the critics of fluoridation have this in their favour. It has been four decades since the practice became widespread in North America. Some recent research raises new concerns. Some research links fluoride exposure to fluorosis, a mottling of children's teeth. Other research suggests it may be connected to a rare form of bone cancer.

Under the circumstances, it is good that Waterloo will engage in a public discussion of fluoridation before citizens say, in the 2010 municipal election, whether they want the practice to continue. When something as essential to life as water is at stake the public has a right to decide what is added to that water. The wisest minds are those that are most open to new information and possibilities.

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