

NORTHERN AREA HEALTH BOARD

Report No 2/2003

Summary of Report of the Forum on Fluoridation

The Forum on Fluoridation was set up by the Minister for Health and Children in May 2000. The terms of reference of the Forum were to;

Review the fluoridation of public water supplies and the programme of research being undertaken on behalf of the health boards in the area.

To report and make recommendations to the Minister for Health and Children.

The Forum comprised a panel of 18 people representing relevant Government Departments, Regional Health Authorities, university faculties engaged in relevant research areas, consumer bodies, environmental interests, and professional dental and medical bodies. In addition its members included specialists engaged in the measurement and reporting of fluoride levels in drinking water, authorities on ethical, legal and sociological matters. During a fourteen month period, the Forum carried out a review of fluoridation in Ireland – the first major review since the introduction of water fluoridation in 1964. The Forum sought input from national and international experts on fluoridation, holding views opposed to and in favour of water fluoridation. Submissions were received from the general public, from non-governmental, professional and public bodies and national and overseas experts in many fields. One of the main objectives of the Forum was to examine scientific evidence for and against water fluoridation. Any claims about the benefits or dangers of fluoridation had to be substantiated by recognised scientific studies and not by anecdotal evidence or individual experiences.

The Forum sought to provide answers to three questions:

Has water fluoridation improved the oral health of the Irish population?

Is there scientific evidence that water fluoridation at a level of 1 part per million (mg/l) endangers human health?

What recommendations should the Forum make to the Minister for Health and Children?

The Forum published its report in September 2002. The Forum concluded that water fluoridation has been effective in improving the dental health of the Irish population and that it does not harm human health. The overall conclusions were that:

Water fluoridation has been very effective in improving the oral health of the Irish population, especially children, but also of adults and the elderly.

The best available and most reliable scientific evidence indicates that at the maximum permitted level of fluoride in drinking water at 1 part per million, human health is not adversely affected.

Dental fluorosis (a form of discolouration of the tooth enamel) is a well recognised condition and an indicator of overall fluoride absorption, whether from natural sources, fluoridated water or the inappropriate use of fluoridated toothpaste at a young age. There is evidence that the prevalence of dental fluorosis is increasing in Ireland.

The Forum made a number of recommendations on water fluoridation which are intended to assist health care providers, public health officials, policy makers and the public in achieving maximum protection against dental decay while minimising the occurrence of dental fluorosis:

The fluoridation of piped public water should continue as a public health measure. The optimal level of fluoride in drinking water should be reduced to between 0.6 and 0.8 parts per million.

There should be ongoing quality assurance of all aspects of water fluoridation.

An expert body should be established to implement the recommendations of the Forum and to advise the Minister on an on-going basis.

Research related to fluoride should continue.

A number of the Forum's recommendations are for the parents of young children and are concerned with the use of toothpaste and the preparation of infant feeds:

Fluoride toothpaste should continue to be used in both fluoridated and non-fluoridated areas.

Fluoride tooth paste is not advised for children under 2 years of age.

Between the ages of 2 and 7 years toothbrushing should be supervised to ensure that only a pea-sized amount of paste is used and swallowing of the paste is avoided.

Infant formula should continue to be reconstituted with boiled tap water in accordance with manufacturer's instructions.

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The quality aspects of fluoride delivery in the NAHB region are monitored at present by the Fluoride Monitoring Committee which meets on a quarterly basis. Monthly distillation tests are carried out using the most up to date equipment. Test results are checked to ensure that fluoride levels are within statutory limits. The results are collated and are submitted to the Dept of Health and Children on a quarterly basis as Performance Indicator PC6.

The Forum also recommended that the optimal level of fluoride in drinking water should be reduced from the current level of between 0.8 and 1.0 parts per million to between 0.6 and 0.8 parts per million. The instruction to Health Boards to bring about this change in Fluoride levels will not be issued until statutory regulations have been introduced to facilitate this.

An expert body will be established to implement the recommendations of the Forum and advise the Minister on an on-going basis. It is anticipated that this expert body will make a number of recommendations in the areas of quality assurance, fluoride monitoring and reporting of fluoride levels under Performance Indicator PC6.

Pending the implementation of these recommendations, fluoride levels in drinking water will continue to be maintained within existing statutory limits and existing monitoring techniques will continue as heretofore.

While the reservoirs supplying the Northern Board are outside the Board's geographic area, there may be some cost implications in the future change of fluoride levels. Information on this is not currently available.

The recommendations in relation to the use of toothpaste and the preparation of infant feeds are of relevance to the parents of young children. The dental service, in collaboration with the Health Promotion Department is currently working to ensure that these recommendations are made known to the Board's health professionals, particularly those dealing with young children and their parents, and to parents themselves. Information leaflets and posters are being designed for distribution.

M WINDLE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

30th January, 2003