

Fluoride debated anew in Senate

Bill stalls as doctor, nurse in Legislature cite health concerns

By Nick Budnick

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In Salem, there's a new landscape for an old fight, over whether Portland and other cities around Oregon should be forced to add fluoride to drinking water.

Although the 2007 Legislature is less than three weeks old, a bill requiring fluoridation of municipal water supplies supported by the Oregon Dental Association already appears to have foundered in a state Senate committee, where the only medical doctor and the only nurse in the Legislature's upper house are openly citing concerns about the measure's safety.

"I've asked for four years now, 'Show me good, credible studies that say fluoride is safe to add to drinking water, and I'll vote for it,' " said Dr. Alan Bates, the Democratic senator from Ashland. "And there aren't any."

He was echoed by Laurie Monnes Anderson, a Democrat and registered nurse who represents Gresham in the Senate.

"I have concerns about the scientific studies ... that say there are real health threats from water fluoridation," she said.

Fluoridation supporters, including retired Newberg dentist April Love, say Bates and Monnes Anderson are misguided, and that health fears about adding fluoride to drinking water are misplaced.

Still, the statements by the Senate's only members of the medical profession illustrate the biggest problem that fluoridation supporters face: that the antifluoridation movement is not just for right-wing kooks anymore.

It's a question that has special significance for Portland, the largest city in the United States to not add fluoride to its water supply, and a high-priority target for both sides of the fight.

The bill that foundered in the Senate Health and Human Services Committee last week would have required cities and water suppliers serving a population of 10,000 or more to add fluoride to drinking water supplies.

Supporters of water fluoridation and most critics do agree on one thing; brushing your teeth with fluoridated toothpaste has been proven to be safe and beneficial. Where they differ is on whether the substance should be put in water.

Supporters say water fluoridation is the best way to protect poor kids who are not raised with good dental care habits. “I can see the difference,” said Love, who conducts oral health screenings of Head Start kids, adding that as a result of what dentists see, “you end up with a strong belief in your soul” on the topic.

Already, five past efforts to make fluoridation mandatory statewide have failed, but never resoundingly. Today, however, the balance of power may be changing.

Although the American Dental Association and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control continue to say fluoridation is safe, opponents cite a variety of new studies of fluoride that have been published in the past year after being reviewed by scientific peers, including:

- A study published in Harvard University’s cancer research journal that found a strong link to a rare, often fatal form of bone cancer called osteosarcoma, which strikes about 250 boys each year.
- A paper published in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, that cited fluoride as being among a slew of insufficiently studied chemicals with a documented potential for neurological effects that could help explain a global “pandemic” of developmental disabilities, like attention deficit disorder and autism.
- A report by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences — the equivalent of the USA’s national team of science — which cited credible research that even at low levels of exposure, fluoride could have subtle effects on the development of the body’s endocrine and hormonal systems, as well as IQ.

Backers question studies

Supporters of fluoridation scoff at such studies.

“It is not good science that is being promoted ... that there is any risk whatsoever in water fluoridation,” said Thomas Aschenbrenner, president of the Northwest Health Foundation, who said that his group is enlisting the support of fluoridation supporters to produce a “white paper” that will respond to the recent studies.

“I’ve not seen anything that I have found compelling” enough to oppose fluoridation, he said.

Particularly significant was the National Research Council report, which although it did not directly address water fluoridation, did suggest several mechanisms by which water fluoridation could affect human health.

Chuck Haynie, a Hood River doctor and fluoridation supporter who read the National Research Council report, said that he feels it was tainted by including three scientists on the council who had concerns about fluoridation. He instead sides with the American Dental Association and the CDC, which both say fluoridation is safe.

Kathy Thiessen, a risk assessment specialist who sat on the National Research Council, and who has worked for the CDC, defended the group's findings, saying that "it certainly is relevant" to water fluoridation. While the ADA and the CDC "both wish to say that our report is consistent with their opinions (that water fluoridation is safe)," she said, "Our report said no such thing."

The report suggested that the maximum level of fluoride that should be allowed in drinking water is close to or below the level that dental advocates want to make mandatory in drinking water. As Thiessen put it, with fluoridation, "there are not the safety factors that are there for other chemicals."

Other groups enter fray

Thiessen noted that while the ADA has questioned the relevance of the National Research Council report, the dentists' group cited the report in a recent warning that parents of infants 12 months or younger should avoid using fluoridated water to make baby formula.

Using fluoridated water in formula can expose infants to more fluoride than is considered safe, and could lead to dental fluorosis, a condition of overexposure that leads to mild discoloration of the tooth's surface.

Critics of fluoridation have received a helping hand from a new source, the Oregon Conservation Network, a coalition of 40 Oregon environmental groups, which recently decided to lobby against fluoridation for reasons of public health and safety.

Sybil Ackerman, a lobbyist for the Oregon League of Conservation Voters, spearheads the network's legislative agenda. In lobbying against water fluoridation, "The feedback I get from lawmakers is very strong one way or another," she said. "This is a very impassioned issue for folks, and a lot of people have decided what they feel."

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