

Water Fluoridation - Ethical issues

The topic of water fluoridation can prompt debates about whether it is ethical. As with many ethical questions, there isn't a single right answer. The key arguments for and against are outlined below and further detail may be found in following link:

[The Ethics of Water Fluoridation](#)

The 'right' for an individual to drink water with no fluoride added

Some people argue that the Local Authority would be interfering with the right for an individual to drink water that has no fluoride added.

Experts have responded by stating that the adjustment of the quantity of fluoride to an optimum level cannot be compared with adding to water a substance not found there ordinarily. Water fluoridation effectively replicates a naturally occurring benefit where fluoride is already present at the optimum level of 1ppm. Therefore there is no such thing as a 'right' to drink unfluoridated water, only a personal preference.

In places such as Hartlepool where the natural level of fluoride is already 1ppm, their citizens already enjoy the protection against tooth decay that this exposure provides. Water in Hartlepool is not treated to remove the fluoride and the health of the local population has not been shown to be impaired by the natural fluoridation at this level.

It is 'mass medication'

Many people would argue that you cannot 'mass medicate' the population with something that already naturally occurs in water. It is not strictly 'medication' since the addition of fluoride is not a means of curing an existing disease but a means of maintaining medical or dental health. In this respect, it is more in the nature of a nutrient than a medicine.

Fluoridation may be viewed as being similar to other measures to add or remove elements to food or water that confer an overall benefit to the consumer. Eg. iodine to salt, vitamins to margarine, folic acid to bread or chlorine to water (to kill bacteria).

It is a fact that tea leaves naturally contain high levels of fluoride (100 to 200ppm), and tea made using boiled water from non-fluoridated areas will retain levels of fluoride at 1 to 4ppm. There is no ethical debate about the banning the sale of tea.

Promoting the 'common good'

Hard evidence that water fluoridation is unsafe will weaken arguments in favour of it, but even with a minimum of unknown risk there is an argument that would question the ethics of withholding something that is on balance beneficial. To do so would deliberately fail to protect and promote the health of the community, especially children. Indeed we have a duty to protect our citizens and improve their health, especially the most vulnerable.

Please note, this document will be updated as and when we receive more feedback on this particular topic.

The ethical debate comes down to a need to reconcile personal preferences with the duty to strive for the 'common good'. The 2007 report by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics in Public Health, suggests that as long as there is no clear evidence of risks or harms, public health measures that strive for the 'common good' should override issues of individual choice or consent.

[Public Health: Ethical Issues 2007](#)

Transparency and Consultation

A key part of the legal framework for introducing water fluoridation and a key part of our local approach is to engage in open and transparent dialogue with all interested parties. A full public consultation will allow all relevant issues to be fully debated.

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