



Joshua Lederberg

Public Finds Conflicts in Fluoridation Vote

THE MERITS of fluoridation make for one of the most intricate technical questions ever submitted to popular decision. In many communities, the question of fluoridating the water supply has been too hot for the local authorities to handle, and when taken to the polls has often lost out.

The weight of expert opinion (with which I concur) favors fluoridation for the dental health of children and discounts the likelihood of any hazard. Therefore, many sociologists have interpreted adverse voter reaction as the alienation of the powerless: "A vote against fluoridation, then, is a vote against science expertise, modernization and the mass society."

Writing in Science magazine, however, Harvey M. Sapolsky, an MIT political scientist, counters that the public is confused rather than alienated. He argues that test polls often show a strong majority in favor of fluoridation before a campaign. Then there ensues an apparent conflict of technical arguments which leaves the public unable to reach a correct decision.

THE FALLACY of this conclusion, in my own opinion, is that a vote on fluoridation is widely perceived as something more than a technical decision—about which, after all, many voters well know their limitations. It is also an expression of political philosophy; that the right to dissent is more important than the merit of the complaint.

Saccharine assurances by profluoridationists that there can be no possible hazard are self-defeating, for

nothing in life is so certain. Many of us would hesitate to subject the "other fellow" to fluoride against his will, no matter how far-fetched his objections might be. Those of us who regard a proper dose of fluoride as a personal benefit can, after all, get it at moderate cost.

On the other hand, the social merit of ensuring better teeth for all children is obvious. The fluoridation controversy is, then, an unusually simple test case of the conflict between personal liberty and what FDR called, in 1912, "the liberty of the community."

We face many more difficult confrontations of this kind as a by-product of biological discovery, and we ought to be learning better how to handle them. In a democracy, the right answer is

not "Let the experts decide."

The most obvious step is, of course, to resolve the argument by more research and better education about its positive conclusions. But there is also a deeper issue: how to soften the conflict between individual and community. This is to say that the enhancement of individual decision should be an important premise of social policy.

THIS PRINCIPLE can often lead to technological evasions of insoluble moral or political conflicts. This is not the place to argue the details of a particular technique, but, to give one illustration, we might offer a third choice to the argument about fluoridation. That would be to add fluoride only in alternate weeks ac-

cording to a prearranged schedule.

Those of us who see a benefit from or are indifferent to fluoride could ignore the schedule. Those who hold against it could save low-fluoride drinking water (fluoride-free water is a laboratory artifact) for use in "fluoride weeks." I would also advise them against drinking tea, which is a rather rich source of fluoride.

In my opinion, very few people would bother to exercise this option, no matter how they voted, except for a very rare sick person under medical advice. This system would also facilitate research on the side effects of extra fluoride on individuals who have a special sensitivity to it, or derive a special advantage from it.

© 1969, The Washington Post Co.