



Dear Councillors

I write to you about the important issue of community water fluoridation.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is Australia's leading expert body supporting health and medical research; developing health advice for the Australian community, health professionals and governments; and providing advice on ethical behaviour in health care and in the conduct of health and medical research.

We are aware that some members of the community are raising concerns about health implications of water fluoridation. NHMRC recently reviewed the scientific evidence that reported any health effects of water fluoridation and checked if they are relevant to Australia. NHMRC found no reliable evidence that community water fluoridation at current Australian levels causes health problems. In particular, NHMRC found no links between water fluoridation and lowered IQ, cognitive dysfunction, cancer, Down syndrome or hip fracture. NHMRC also found no reliable evidence of a link between water fluoridation and thyroid problems, chronic kidney disease, kidney stones, high blood pressure, musculoskeletal pain or osteoporosis.

Most of the evidence on possible harms to humans is from areas with higher levels of fluoride than we use in Australia. This is important as we cannot compare our situation with such countries. Confidence in the conclusions of these studies is also affected by the small number of studies and how they were carried out. Many did not control for factors that could affect the results and their interpretation, such as taking into consideration consumption of fluoride from other sources, exposure to other factors such as iodine, and socio-economic status of study participants.

Some people ask if there is a cumulative effect of consuming fluoride over a lifetime. The toxicologists on our expert committee advised that fluoride is excreted regularly by the kidneys to achieve a 'steady state' that is safe for humans. This is different to lead which accumulates in the body.

The findings from the latest review are summarised in the *Information Paper – water fluoridation: dental and other human health outcomes* (the Information Paper), on the NHMRC website at <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/eh43-0>. NHMRC ensured that the ethics of community water fluoridation were considered during this review, as we were aware of some community concern, including the issue of informed consent. The expert committee had two members with expertise in ethics, and a discussion paper was considered by the committee prior to the issue being discussed by the Australian Health Ethics Committee. The result is a section in the Information Paper that focuses on ethical considerations (pg. 55-57).

The expert committee tasked with guiding the development of this evaluation of the evidence on the health effects of water fluoridation was selected to ensure appropriate expertise in the key areas of science and review methodology, in order to undertake a transparent and rigorous evidence-based assessment. It comprised highly-regarded experts in the fields of public health, oral health, epidemiology, child health, toxicology, cancer, bone biology, neurodevelopment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, water management and health ethics.

Australia has a long history of community water fluoridation to help reduce tooth decay. Tooth decay is one of the most common health issues in Australia, affecting five out of ten children and nine out of ten adults. It can cause pain, difficulty eating and sleeping as well as costly dental treatments. The Council of NHMRC is made up of the Chief Health Officers from all of Australia's states and territories, and they repeatedly assure me of the value of community water fluoridation as a broad-reaching and equitable public health measure. NHMRC is not alone in our support for water fluoridation; it is supported by a wide range of public health and dental health organisations in Australia and around the world.

The latest evidence builds on past research and is clear – community water fluoridation helps to reduce tooth decay across the population. NHMRC's recently released Public Statement further summarises this information and the new Questions and Answers resource can answer queries your constituents may have. You can find these documents on the NHMRC website at <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/e44-0>.

Yours sincerely



Professor Anne Kelso AO  
Chief Executive Officer

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