

# City debates benefits of fluoride in water

WATSONVILLE VOTERS  
TO DECIDE ON MEASURE S

By David L. Beck  
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William Jarvis liked to put on water fluoridation debates for his students at Loma Linda University's School of Dentistry. He would ask them to vote twice — before the debate and after.

"We always had people favorable toward fluoridation before the debate and less favorable after," said Jarvis,

who retired two years ago as professor of public health and preventive medicine.

Was it the science that swayed them? No, said Jarvis.

"They didn't have to convince you that fluoridation was a mistake," he said. "They only had to put doubt in your mind ... create the illusion of a controversy."

But the controversy over Watsonville's Measure S is no illusion. The ballot measure — dubbed the anti-fluori-

dation measure, although, interestingly, the word fluoridation never appears in the text of the measure — has divided people here as it has elsewhere in California.

Backers of fluoridating public water supplies call the sowing of seeds of doubt "scare tactics," while opponents argue that the illusion lies in the belief that fluoridation helps prevent cavities.

It's a debate that has raged ever since public health authorities began ordering fluoridation in the early 1950s

as an inexpensive and effective treatment.

The government's position hasn't changed. A lengthy 2001 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention counsels frequent small doses of fluorides, from drinking water and from using fluoride toothpaste, as the most effective treatment. (Opponents cite one sentence in that study as proof that fluoridated water alone

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won't do it.)

Measure S restricts the substances that can be added to Watsonville water supplies to those that are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and are without contaminants.

Tricky wording, Jarvis points out, because the FDA doesn't approve anything in local water supplies because it has no constitutional authority over local water supplies.

Opponents claim the effectiveness of fluoridation has never been proved, and talk about the contaminants the fluoride additive may contain. They object in a political way to treating people through their water supplies, and they distinguish between people-treating and water purification treatments such as chlorine.

Backers disagree with the notion it's either ineffective or unsafe. "It's the most scientifically studied of all the public health measures," Jarvis said. Just about every major public health organization, from the American Dental Association and the American Medical Association to the CDC and the World Health Organization, supports it. It's been so effective that dentists who once mostly filled cavities have had to find other things to do.

The percentage of Americans on public water systems who receive fluoridated water

is nearing the two-thirds mark, and even in California, where only 29 percent of people are on fluoridated public water systems, that number has nearly doubled over the last decade.

But there is considerable doubt whether Measure S will have any legal effect even if it passes. The California Safe Drinking Water Act of 1995 requires water systems to fluoridate if they have more than 10,000 hookups and if they can afford to do so. Watsonville is big enough, and it has a \$946,000 grant from the California Dental Foundation to do the work.

When the grant came through, so did an order from the state Department of Health Services. The city council asked for bids on a system last month.

San Jose, which appears on a national list as the largest city in the country without fluoridation, is actually partly fluoridated because East Side Evergreen voted yes in a 1963 referendum.

San Jose Water Co., which serves about 80 percent of the rest of the city, plans to comply with the state law and is on the list for funding, according to

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company Vice President Dick Balocco.

The city of Santa Cruz has so far remained exempt from the California law because, following a 1999 referendum, it has not sought funds for fluoridation.

Does the state law trump local voters' wishes? Jarvis says it does. And while no city has yet gone to court over the 1995 law, Watsonville City Attorney Alan Smith has legal opinions from the state attorney general's office and the office of the legislative counsel that say Watsonville must fluoridate.

So when the issue is put to the voters, the fur flies. Backers of fluoridation speak passionately of poor children who cannot sleep or study because of toothache. They deride anti-fluoridation arguments as pseudo-science.

Opponents speak with equal passion about the dangers of tooth damage from fluorides. They demand to see studies on how fluoride works and how much water people drink.

Both sides point to people they see as outsiders trying to alter local water supplies. Jeff Green of San Diego, the head of Citizens for Safe Drinking Water and probably the nation's leading anti-fluoridationist, said his organization helps local people fight fluoridation, rather than providing a "central response," although Green himself is always on the move, testifying from Washington, D.C., to Washington state to Watsonville.

Nick Bulaich, a Watsonville building contractor, said he went to a Watsonville City

Council meeting on the issue last year with an open mind, but found himself persuaded by Green and Maureen Jones, a San Jose woman who is also active full-time against fluoridation.

"I like to read both sides of an issue," Bulaich said. "Any claim they make, they better

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— WILLIAM JARVIS, FORMER LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

give me a document to back it up."

They did, to Bulaich's satisfaction. He helped put Measure S on the ballot. He's derisive of the other side's arguments.

"They'll give you some bogus studies — this city fluoridated and over the course of 40 years" the rate of dental problems went down. "That's not what did it," he said. "What did it was people learned to brush their teeth and went to dentists..."

"If you go to the dentist and do daily dental hygiene, you wouldn't need fluoridated water — even if it works, which it doesn't."

Equally passionate on the

other side is Theresa Ontiveros, manager of a Planned Parenthood clinic in Watsonville. "One of the things that I see all the time is children coming in with a lot of dental cavities," she said, noting that they miss school because of dental problems and seldom have insurance.

"I know that putting fluoride in the water isn't going to solve all the problems," she said, "but I know it's definitely going to help everyone."

She decries the opposition's "scare tactics" and "misinformation," which she said is easily believed by the poor and uneducated.

"It's a disservice to the people that really need it. It's always the poor, right? It's always the poor because they're uninsured. They don't have access to the services."

Debbie Trent, executive director of the public health dental clinic Dientes, agrees: "It's terrible that the city has the money, has the order from the state, and people are out there trying to convince uneducated people" that fluoride is bad for them.

Nonetheless, the controversy — or rather, the illusion of controversy — persists.

"There really is sort of an anti-government, anti-science culture that this appeals to," Jarvis said. "The studies that have been done in this area show these people tend to be anti-medicine, pro-chiropractic, pro-health foods ... just sort of that health-food culture."

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