

Fluoride rocks! We must continue community water fluoridation

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Salisbury-Rowan Utilities (SRU) is a full-service water and wastewater utility serving more than 52,000 customers in eight municipalities as well as unincorporated portions of Rowan County, North Carolina. SRU treats on average 8.9 million gallons per day of water that originates from the Yadkin River which is part of the Yadkin/Pee Dee Basin. This massive drainage basin is 4,000 square miles encompassing 2.5 million acres and extends 190 miles upstream of SRU's intake locations. The water distribution system includes 437 miles of piping and almost 3,000 fire hydrants.

In July 2011, the system had to temporarily suspend community water fluoridation (CWF) in order to assess damage to feed equipment and a portion of a containment structure at a water treatment plant.

People who are unfamiliar with the practice of adjusting the level of fluoride in the water system to protect public health may be taken by surprise at the controversy that can erupt in a community that is considering starting or stopping CWF. In Salisbury, opponents of fluoridation used the maintenance issue as an opportunity to question whether funds might be better served in another public health program.

Fluoride occurs naturally in all bodies of water in the world, and community water fluoridation is a practice that has been in place in Salisbury since 1952. In fact, Salisbury was the second municipality in North Carolina to begin this practice to protect residents' teeth. The current level is 0.7 mg/L, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with an annual cost of less than one dollar per person per year.

Salisbury's fluoridation debate coincided with several other communities in North Carolina that were also contemplating whether to continue the public health practice of fluoridating. As authorities in Salisbury began weighing both sides of the issue, City Council members were inundated with misinformation regarding unfounded claims of adverse health and environmental effects of adjusting fluoride levels in water.

A cursory search of fluoride online can reveal seemingly unlimited resources of information, the quality of which can range from the driest of scientific journals, to the outer reaches of fringe pseudo-science. A conscientious examination of the issue will demonstrate that fluoridation is one of the most cost-effective and valuable investments a municipality can make in the health of its citizens. Adjusting the level of fluoride in the water supply has been shown to reduce

cavities by approximately 25 percent. Research from the CDC shows that fluoridation can save a community approximately \$38 dollars in dental treatment costs for every one dollar invested.

The financial and human costs associated with dental disease are far greater than many Americans realize, and are almost entirely preventable. Too often, the most vulnerable members of society—the young, elderly, poor and disabled—bear the biggest burden of dental decay and pain. Although oral health has improved overall for Americans in recent decades, tooth decay remains the most common chronic childhood disease, affecting more than one in five children.

Over 3,000 studies have been produced about the safety and effectiveness of community water fluoridation. The leading, most respected medical and health organizations endorse water fluoridation, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Dental Association, and the American Medical Association. The CDC has touted water fluoridation as one of the "10 great public health achievements of the 20th century."

It's imperative that water operators and local officials have access to information from trusted sources

when faced with questions and concerns about CWF. The Pew Charitable Trusts' children's dental campaign can be an invaluable resource to local communities on these issues. Pew and its partner organizations provide information that is balanced, peer reviewed and scientifically accurate. The dental campaign was instrumental in providing background materials and easily understandable fact sheets about fluoridation and helping to explain the issue to those involved in the decision-making process in Salisbury. More importantly, the dental campaign is committed to assisting communities in engaging with experts at the local level to help inform the fluoridation debate.

Pew has also partnered with the American Academy of Pediatrics and more than 50 other state, local, and national organizations to form the Campaign for Dental Health. This network collaborates and coordinates to ensure communities of all sizes have access to reliable, useful information on the safety and effectiveness of CWF. The Campaign and its many resources can be found at ilikemyteeth.org.

The decision on whether or not to begin or maintain fluoridation is a serious one that impacts the health of every citizen in a community.

After thoroughly evaluating the costs and safety of operations versus the health benefits to its customers and the community, Salisbury-Rowan Utilities reestablished its community fluoridation efforts. The City of Salisbury's water department prides itself on making decisions that reflect its mission statement, "To provide quality water and wastewater services to Rowan County that protect the

environment, promote public health, improve the quality of life, support planned growth, and maintain the public trust."

In Salisbury, water authorities worked with the North Carolina Public Health Dental Hygienist, Debbye Krueger, to review the anti-fluoridation information that was being sent to the City Council; she provided authorities with relevant science and studies to inform their decision making and served as an advisor to the City Council and the Rowan County Health Department Director. It is imperative for any city or municipality examining the issue of community water fluoridation to develop a relationship with authorities within the county health department or with local public health officials.

In addition, the City continues to reeducate its staff and local officials about the benefits of community water fluoridation. There is a need to make more resources available for water operators, engineers, local officials and customers about the benefits of community fluoridation. The Campaign for Dental Health is a great place to find such information and materials. But for any community that is considering a change to its water fluoridation policy, the most important thing to maintain public confidence is to place trust in local public health officials and rely on the scientific evidence.

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