

Charles Frank
BSc DDS

Building Bridges, Not Walls

“A single twig breaks, but the bundle of twigs is strong.”

--Attributed to Tecumseh, Shawnee chief and military leader in the War of 1812

When I served in the role of Chancellor in the Knights of Columbus Degree Team, there was a segment of the degree where each candidate was handed a string. They were asked to break this string, an easy task. Then two of the strongest were asked to do the same with a rope. The message was that each string on its own was weak and very easy to break, however, when the individual strings were combined in the rope, they were impossible to break. This was a lesson on the power of unity -- individuals committed to a common cause.

This past January, the City of Windsor resumed the practice of community water fluoridation (CWF), nine years after removing it. This was the result of a strong effort by several individuals and organizations.

In 2002, while I was working part-time for the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit (WECHU), substituting for the Chief Dental Officer of Health, Dr. Arnold Abramson, I saw a notice on his bulletin board stating that CWF had ceased in Tecumseh. This struck me close to home as this is where I lived with my wife and three daughters. I had a brief chat with one of my acquaintances who knew key decision-makers in local government, and he said, “Chuck, forget it. Important people are dead set against it, and it isn’t going to happen.” A poor choice of words as it presented a challenge to me, and I love a challenge.

Having an interest in history, I recalled the age-old maxim against fighting on too many fronts. Knowing this, I called Dr. Andrea Silverman, then-president of the Essex County Dental Society (ECDS) of which I was not a very active member and asked for some help. I also contacted the local health unit, the Essex County Medical Society

and Sherry Frey, who was involved with the dental auxiliary program at St. Clair College. Dr. Abramson, who was very supportive, gave me a 90-plus page document from the Supreme Court of British Columbia – the reasons for Justice Power’s decision in *Millership vs. British Columbia*. In that document, every conceivable argument made by those against CWF was answered.

As this was something that affected the health of the community, I also approached the local service clubs such as Rotary and the Knights of Columbus to speak to their members. I was well-received. In my many presentations, it was clear that it is not sufficient to simply provide the facts. There had to be an ask or a call to action.

I was impressed by Doreen Ouellette, one of the town councillors who took the time to read the 90-plus page document from the Supreme Court. She said that she didn’t know what was going on as people were stopping her at the grocery store telling her that they wanted the fluoride returned.

Dr. Saad Jasim, the former Director of Water Quality and Production at the City of Windsor’s water treatment plant, who was quite proud of the fact that Windsor had received an award for the best water in Canada, supported our efforts around CWF and spoke on our behalf.

Over several presentations, we went from “absolutely not” to “let’s put it on the ballot” (which would mean educating the entire voting population) to “we can make the decision at town council.” Tecumseh Town Council then voted to resume the practice of CWF in a five-to-two vote. Mission accomplished!

I was extremely grateful to those who helped me on this campaign. I approached Dr. Silverman and asked her how

I could return the favour to the ECDS. She told me that they were looking for a new ODA councillor to replace one whose term had come up. This marked the start of my involvement with the ODA as a volunteer.

Fast forward a few years to 2010. The anti-fluoridationist sentiment had returned to Windsor, now much better organized and with what seemed to be a sympathetic ear from some on the Windsor City Council. Again, we had to organize in our communities. Although we made a strong presentation to Windsor City Council, it seemed they supported the junk science and misinformation and we lost CWF. But we didn't give up.

We had advised the city that by ceasing CWF, there would be an increase in the rate of dental caries in the community. A few years later, in 2018, the WECHU published their *Oral Health Report*, which outlined the dental health of the community, demonstrating a 50 per cent increase in the caries rate in school children. Armed with this information and bringing the group back together, along with support from Dr. Johnny Johnson from the American Fluoridation Society, we were successful in having CWF reinstated with a very strong eight-to-three vote. After a delay for tests to be done, fluoride started flowing in the city's taps on January 12th, 2022 – nine years after it was removed.


This was a successful, grassroots effort of local advocates and people who showed real leadership. A special thanks to Dr. Wajid Ahmed, Kim Casier, Theresa Marentette and Nicole Dupius and the others at the WECHU who coordinated our strategy meetings, Drs. Allen Heimann and Gary Kirk (former Chief Medical Officers of Health at the WECHU — this was a long-term project), Gary McNamara (Chair of the WECHU and the Mayor of Tecumseh) who always believed in the science, the group at the Halton Peel Dental Association (Drs. Sanjukta Mohanta, Kelvin Fung, Steve Lipinski, Lisa Bentley, Vipin Mithia, Keith DaSilva, Brenda Thomson, and Larry Tenaschuk) and former MPP Bob Delaney, for their letters, advice, and moral support, Dr. Johnny Johnson and Dr. Steven Slott and others from the American Fluoridation Society. There was Sherry Frey and the students at St. Clair College, the group at the ECDS and the ODA, the latter including

our Past-President Dr. Lesli Hapak, David Gentili, Bonnie Dean, Jenna Berndt, and Joe Chiera, the members of the community who wrote in and spoke at the city council meetings, Joyce Zuk, executive director of Family Services Windsor-Essex, Dr. Maria van Harten and Dr. Bryna Warsawsky of the Middlesex London Health Unit and Krista Dufour, a very well-spoken local dental hygienist, and the list continues; however, my editor tells me there is a word limit for this column.

Speaking of the group from Halton Peel, they coordinated a massive province-wide campaign bringing in tens of thousands of signatures on a petition to make CWF mandatory province-wide, and they were so close to success but were derailed at the eleventh hour when the bills were cancelled due to the provincial election resulting in a change in government. The efforts of this small group, that I was honoured to be a part of, resulted in a campaign of such magnitude as to be legendary. It shows what a group of individuals united in a common cause can accomplish.

Most important, is that by building bridges, not walls, we found a common cause people from diverse backgrounds and interests could rally around and accomplish what no one individual could do. As I worked on this project, I met and developed solid friendships with many of these people. This has led to other mutually co-operative projects.

Lord Robert Baden-Powell used *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling when he developed the Scouting program in 1907. In this book, there is a passage: "For the strength of the wolf is the pack, and the strength of the pack is the wolf." Working together as a pack, wolves can bring down animals much bigger than themselves.

The key message here is that individually, we are not as strong as we are when we work together. Without the support of many from several vectors of the community, we would not have been successful. This applies not just to CWF, but to any good cause that we can find common ground on. United we stand. 



Dr. Charles Frank is the ODA's President for 2021-2022. Dr. Frank maintains a general dentistry practice in Windsor. He may be contacted at cfrank@oda.ca.