

FLUORIDATION OF PUBLIC WATER SUPPLIES AMENDMENT BILL 2013

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Bill introduced on motion by Dr Andrew McDonald, read a first time and printed.**Second Reading****Dr ANDREW McDONALD** (Macquarie Fields) [10.10 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Tooth decay is caused by bacterial acids that remove calcium and phosphate from the teeth. Fluoride limits the amount of acid produced and repairs the damage caused before this damage becomes permanent. The benefits of the fluoridation of water supplies were discovered when it was observed that areas with lower levels of tooth decay had a higher level of natural fluoride in the water supply. The addition of fluoride to the water supply simply brings all areas up to the level of fluoride that occurs naturally in some parts of the world. For that reason, New South Wales water is fluoridated to one part per million. Fluoridation of drinking water has been described by the United States Centers for Disease Control as one of the 10 most important medical advances of the twentieth century. Water fluoridation has the support of every health authority worldwide.

However, as we have seen, resistance to fluoridation continues. Those areas most at risk are smaller communities, such as those on the New South Wales North Coast where local councillors and health service providers are bullied, heckled and intimidated into restricting the use of water fluoridation in their communities, with the resulting increased rates of tooth decay—children and other vulnerable groups being the most affected. This leads to a lifetime of increased dental morbidity and, as we are now learning, effects on other organs such as the heart. Heart disease and dental disease have been known for many years to be linked. However, recent evidence shows that the link is even more significant than previously known.

The aim of this bill is simple. The bill will give the New South Wales Government, via the Minister for Health, the jurisdiction and authority to direct water authorities to fluoridate drinking water. In New South Wales, the Water Fluoridation Act was passed in 1957 and the addition of fluoride is by regulation. As well as being New South Wales Government policy, it is recommended by the World Health Organisation, the National Health and Medical Research Council and every reputable health department and professional body worldwide.

In the document entitled, "Oral Health 2020: A Strategic Framework for Dental Health in NSW", the Health Department states on page 9:

In the coming decade, NSW Health will continue to pursue a fluoridated water supply for the population and integrate oral health promotion within other health promotion activities in areas such as healthy eating, prevention of overweight and obesity, and smoking reduction programs.

On page 12 it states:

Fluoridation of public water supplies is the single most effective public health measure for reducing dental caries across the population, with its most pronounced effects among those who are disadvantaged and most at risk ... Since 2004 NSW Health, in conjunction with the LHDs, Local Councils, and Water Supply Authorities, has been proactive in developing strategies to

promote water fluoridation to rural communities in NSW to reduce inequalities in oral health ... Population coverage of water fluoridation has increased from approximately 90 per cent in 2004 to approximately 96 per cent in 2012.

I know that in some small communities it is not feasible to fluoridate the water supply, so the coverage will never be 100 per cent. Despite that, there are still about 300,000 people in New South Wales who do not have access to fluoridated water and, for that reason, the plan is to continue to encourage and work with local governments of unfluoridated communities to introduce fluoride to the local water supply.

Water has been fluoridated since 1956 in Yass and the Water Fluoridation Act was passed in 1957. Lismore council was advised to fluoridate its water in 2006. The anti-fluoridation lobby took the case to the High Court and in August 2013 the council voted 6-4 against instituting fluoridation. The rescission motion was won 6-5 on 10 September 2013—Tuesday night—after one councillor who initially voted against fluoridation changed their mind and another returned from leave. The passage of this motion by a single vote was in the company of a hostile and very vocal audience of anti-fluoridation lobbyists.

I delayed the introduction of this bill as its earlier introduction would probably have changed the outcome of the rescission motion. The people of Lismore have been fighting for seven years to get their water supply fluoridated and to introduce the bill earlier would have further delayed that. I made this decision because, when it comes to fluoridation, time is of the essence, as every day without fluoride places high-risk groups—especially children—at increased risk of tooth decay.

This vote by Lismore council in favour of water fluoridation can be rescinded at any time, meaning that seven years of lobbying by local health professionals remains at risk. The councillors and health professionals, including the chief health officer, were jostled by an angry crowd at the end of the meeting. No council should ever have to go through the seven years of pain and preventable dental caries that the children of Lismore have suffered. For many of these children, the damage has already been done. Expecting local councillors to be able to withstand a hostile crowd of fellow citizens when it comes to fluoridation entrenches the status quo. This will mean that many of the 300,000 New South Wales citizens that do not have access to fluoridated water may not get it for the foreseeable future. It has already happened in Queensland, which has lower rates of fluoridation than New South Wales and higher rates of dental caries as a consequence. Unless we act, the situation will get worse.

The bill is a simple one. It gives the Minister the authority to direct water providers to follow New South Wales Government policy. The Deputy Premier, Andrew Stoner, is on YouTube publicly opposing fluoridation at a fluoride forum in Wauchope on 12 September 2009. Any member who wishes to watch his speech can Google it—part six is the one to watch. He echoes the arguments against water fluoridation by the anti-fluoridation lobby, which fall into three areas, and I will go through those one by one.

The first is expense for local councils. Water fluoridation is one of the most cost-effective health interventions ever used. In 2013 you can tell who has had the benefits of water fluoridation by comparing the state of older Australians' teeth to those of younger Australians whose water has been fluoridated. Cost estimates of the benefit of water fluoridation vary from \$12 to \$80 per dollar spent.

The second argument is loss of democracy for local councils. There are those who complain that bureaucrats are running the State, such as in health and in relation to fluoride, forcing their will on the people without any democracy. This is clearly untrue. This is the argument that has denied fluoride to the children of Lismore until now, and it is time for the State Government to look after the dental health of the public. This is a decision for the politicians. It is time for the politicians to take responsibility for public health as the status quo is clearly not working.

The final argument is that the science cannot say whether it is good or bad. The science is clear: fluoride is safe and effective. Following the Wauchope meeting, the then Deputy Leader of the Opposition indicated that he would pursue the matter in the Parliament and asked question 8283, that is, whether NSW Health proposed to assist conscientious objectors with the cost of rainwater tanks and/or filtration devices. The answer then given, which remains relevant, was that the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines prepared by the National Health and Medical Research Council define safe drinking water. Test results from monitoring of public water supplies are compared with the guideline values to determine the supply's safety. Additional monitoring and reporting is mandated under the New South Wales Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Act 1957.

As Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Minister for Health I signed more letters about fluoridation than any other health topic. It is time this anti-fluoridation circus ended. The New South Wales Government should defend the dental health of the 300,000 people who do not have access to fluoridated water. Unless this Parliament acts, preventable dental caries will occur every day until the water supply is fluoridated. I am informed that on Tuesday night in Lismore Dr Kerry Chant, the Chief Health Officer, was told by an angry observer of the meeting, "We know your face. I have friends in Syria. Do you know of sarin gas?" The Chief Health Officer of this State was threatened while in Lismore simply to encourage the council to follow New South Wales Government policy.

This behaviour is typical of some of the more extreme elements of the anti-fluoride debate. This Parliament should never allow such harassment of a senior and highly respected director to be repeated. This is a line in the sand. The Parliament needs to act to stop this circus. It is time for the State Government to protect the health of the children in New South Wales by defending them from such people. I expect the Government will find a way to not support this bill, simple as it is. I expect the Government will say it is consulting the community first, even though this simple bill is merely to ensure that the Government's own policy is followed. At best, this consultation period will only delay good public health practice, that is, the introduction of fluoridation.

Mrs Roza Sage: Well, why didn't you guys do it?

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: The member for Blue Mountains asks why we did not do it. We did increase the amount of fluoridation and continued to do so. Had we been able to continue to encourage councils to successfully fluoridate their water supply, this legislation would not be needed. I remind the member for Blue Mountains that this seven-year battle in Lismore to fluoridate the water supply went to the High Court. This kind of harassment should never be repeated. It is time the State Government protected children's health by defending them from those people. I expect the Government will say it is consulting the community and this will delay good public practice. The need to consult on the benefit of

introducing fluoride to 5 per cent of the people of New South Wales when the remaining 95 per cent already receive it is completely beyond me. Every day without fluoride puts a child at risk of preventable dental decay. At worst, as Sir Barnett Cocks said, a committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled. That is the problem I see with prolonged consultation. This could be put in the too-hard pile because of the politics of fluoridation. The risk we face with delay is an increase in preventable dental caries. I urge all members to vote for the State Government to take responsibility for fluoridation of water. I commend the bill to the House.

Debate adjourned on motion by Mr Rob Stokes and set down as an order of the day for a future day.