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# **Five Lessons:** Advocating for Water Fluoridation

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## Five lessons



1. Lead with the need
2. Don't rely on a low-key approach
3. Choose words carefully
4. Strengthen support among water operators
5. Communicate to a broad network

# Lead with the need



**“... a solution needs a problem. If the people required to change do not perceive there is a problem, you can spend from now until the cows come home, but you will never convince them to change.”**

*— James McGovern, technology guru*



- Fluoridation is a solution to a problem.
- Establishing that problem is crucial before we can convince policy makers and the public that fluoridation deserves their support.

# Lead with the need

## There is plenty of need to talk about

- A survey of parents found that roughly one out of seven children ages 6-12 had suffered a toothache within the past six months.
- Children with poor oral health status were nearly three times more likely than their peers to miss school due to dental pain.
- The average 50-year-old has had decay affect 50 surfaces of his or her teeth.



# The conventional wisdom



1. Quietly approach a city council member whom you believe will sponsor a proposal to fluoridate
2. Avoid any broad, public dialogue about fluoridation for fear that it could draw opponents out of the woodwork
3. Arrange for a dentist or other medical professional to testify to the city council right before it votes
4. Hope that the fluoridation proposal passes

# The consequences of this approach

## **PROBLEM:** The public is vulnerable to misinformation

- 58% of Maryland residents couldn't identify the purpose for adjusting the fluoride in public drinking water.
- **80%** of Americans admit they have a low level of knowledge about fluoridation.

### How Informed Are You About Fluoridation?

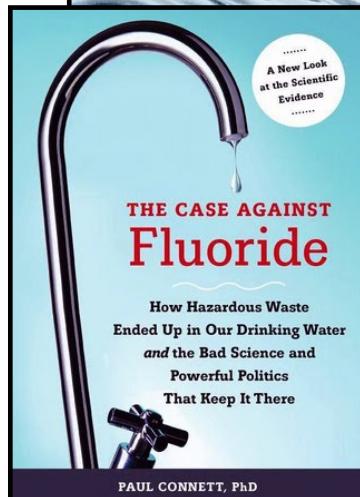
Survey of 1,503 adults (2010)

Very Informed	20%
Somewhat Informed	54%
Not at All Informed	26%



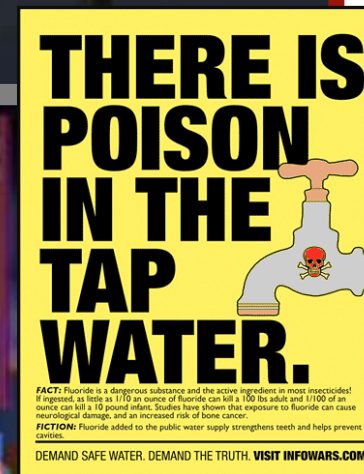
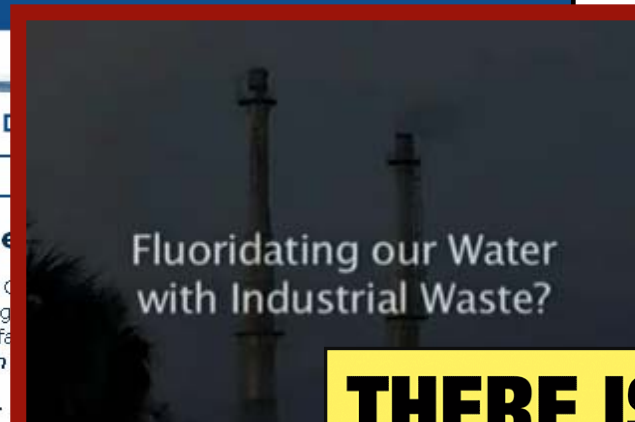
# Opponents: persistent and web-savvy

Moms Against Fluoridation .org



• impaired  
• brain damage  
• our government  
• cancer studies  
• implications

Review the evidence Database



Opponents are aggressively posting web content and seeking media coverage.

# A web of misinformation



**Google** fluoride

About 7,930,000 results (0.30 seconds)

**Everything**  
Images  
Videos  
News  
More

**Any time**  
Latest  
Past 2 days

**All results**  
Wonder wheel  
Timeline  
Sites with images  
More search tools

**Fluoride is Poison** ✓  
[www.douglasreport.com/fluoride](http://www.douglasreport.com/fluoride) Dr. Bill Douglass Explai

**Fluoride** - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia ✓  
Fluoride is the anion F<sup>-</sup>, the reduced form of fluorine. Both or containing the element fluorine are sometimes called **fluorides**.  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fluoride](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fluoride) - Cached - Similar

**Fluoride Action Network** ✓  
Fluoride Action Network is an international coalition seeking t the toxicity of **fluoride** compounds and the health impacts of .  
[www.fluoridealert.org/](http://www.fluoridealert.org/) - Cached - Similar

**50 Reasons to Oppose Fluoridation** ✓  
1) **Fluoride is not an essential nutrient** (NRC 1993 and IOM linked to a **fluoride** deficiency. Humans can have perfectly  
[www.fluoridealert.org/50-reasons.htm](http://www.fluoridealert.org/50-reasons.htm) - Cached - Similar

Images for **fluoride** - Report images



## The weakness of the low-key approach:

- It doesn't work well in an era when the anti-fluoride crowd is "talking" every day to the public.
- It does nothing to prevent or defeat rollback attempts.



# Choose words carefully

WebMD

FluorideFacts.org

## Learning Center

Fluoride is a chemical compound with a lot of uses. One of the most well-known applications of fluoride is in toothpaste. Because it is so effective reducing cavities and nearly every single dental health product contains it, you can remember when I was in elementary school that we would all dutifully swish, gargle, and spit, before trooping to the cafeteria on Friday mornings to receive a special fluoride treatment. I don't know if schools still do anything like that, but I do know that I still follow the advice people use Fluoride treated toothpaste and fluoride varnish to prevent cavities and decay.

## Dental Health and Fluoride Treatment

Fluoride is a mineral that occurs naturally in many foods and water. Every day, minerals are added to and lost from a tooth's enamel layer through two processes, demineralization and remineralization. Minerals are lost (demineralization) from a tooth's enamel layer when acids -- formed from plaque bacteria and sugars in the mouth -- attack. Minerals such as fluoride, calcium, and phosphate are redeposited (remineralization) to the enamel layer from the foods and waters consumed. This process helps to keep teeth strong and healthy.

## Debate Continues Over Fluoridation

Wichita's water supply has sparked a debate for decades that has pitted health professionals against everyday Kansans as to whether to fluoridate it or not. "It's one of the most highly studied chemicals we've ever had," said Wichita dentist Dr. Brick Scheer.



Using the word "chemical" plays into the hands of anti-fluoride activists

# Choose words carefully



## What is dental fluorosis?

Dental fluorosis is a change in the appearance of the tooth's enamel. These changes can vary from barely noticeable white spots in mild forms to staining and pitting in the more severe forms.



## What is enamel fluorosis?

A child may face the condition called enamel fluorosis if he or she gets too much fluoride during the years of tooth development. Too much fluoride can result in defects in tooth enamel.

# Water operators: the trump card



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## BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

### Fluoride debate bubbles up in Bozeman

Charlie Graff wants Bozeman to stop putting fluoride in its drinking water.

“No one really knows for sure if it’s safe or not,” he told Bozeman City Commissioners earlier this month. “There are some of us out here who are really concerned.”

Graff, a sophomore at Montana State University, won’t drink or bathe in unfiltered city tap water. He drinks bottled water and showers beneath a special showerhead that neutralizes fluoride.

Despite widespread scientific evidence that fluoride is a cavity fighter, the decades-old debate over whether fluoride is safe continues to rage again.


“On the typical year, I’m going to estimate I get roughly four comments from people who are opposed to it and about four inquiries from people who want to make sure their water is fluoridated,” said Rick Moroney, superintendent of Bozeman’s water treatment facilities.

**“It’s the only process that we do to the water that’s not required by state or federal regulations,” he said. “There’s a wealth of information from people supporting it and also much information from people who are opposed.”**

*— A water operator in Montana*

# Focus groups in Mississippi

## Water operators' attitudes:

- Water operators don't see oral health as a significant issue or problem.
  - The work they do is not appreciated.
  - EPA reporting requirements are a major hassle. The CDC is not on their radar screen.
  - They feel as though they're competing with the bottled water industry.
- 
- A photograph of a blue and white 'Welcome to Mississippi' sign. The sign features the state of Mississippi in red, with the word 'MISSISSIPPI' in white serif font. Below it, the phrase 'Birthplace of America's Music' is written in a cursive script. The sign is set against a background of green trees and a blue sky.
- Skepticism about fluoride:
    - *Don't we get enough from toothpaste?*
    - *Should government require this? Should it just be a personal decision?*

# Recognizing their dedication



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## NEWS

R E L E A S E

Illinois Department of Public Health

March 23, 2011

### **More Than 430 Illinois Communities Receive Top Honors for Maintaining Fluoride Levels**

**SPRINGFIELD, Ill.** – The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) along with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) today presented fluoridation awards to 433 community water systems for maintaining state mandated fluoride levels every month in 2010. The awards were presented at a ceremony held today during the 2011 Illinois Section American Water Works Association Conference and Expo at the Crowne Plaza in Springfield.

“Water fluoridation can improve overall oral health for both children and adults. Studies show water fluoridation reduces tooth decay by about 25 percent over a person’s lifetime,” said Dr. Damon T. Arnold, state public health director. “Studies also show that widespread community water fluoridation saves money for both families and the health care system. We applaud those communities that maintain levels of fluoride in their water systems and encourage them to continue their efforts.”

Of those recognized: 101 systems earned a commendation for meeting state recommended fluoride levels of 0.9 to 1.2 parts per million for at least five consecutive years; 40 for at least 10 years; 78 for at least 15 years; 14 for at least 20 years and 7 for at least 25 years. Another 110 received honorable mention for meeting state fluoride levels 11 of 12 months in 2010.

Illinois honors local water systems for maintaining optimal fluoridation

# Communicate to a broad network

## Speak or provide fact sheets at meetings of:

- The “healthy families” coalition
- State water associations
- County health officers
- Head Start directors
- Rotary clubs or other civic groups
- City or county chambers of commerce
- Your state’s public health association chapter



*If your state has formed a Medicaid Re-Design Committee, encourage it to make water fluoridation part of its agenda*