

Update on Water Fluoridation for Portsmouth

In 2005, Southampton City PCT formally requested South Central Strategic Health Authority to explore the feasibility and cost effectiveness of water fluoridation to help improve dental health in a city which has a worse rate of tooth decay than the national average. In both Southampton and Portsmouth, the number of decayed, missing or filled teeth in 5 year olds which is the measure of the level of dental decay in a population, is around 1.98 compared to a national average of about 1.47.

The Strategic Health Authority, under current legislation, is the organisation responsible for carrying out a public consultation on fluoridation, if requested to do so by the local PCT, and ultimately deciding whether or not to move to fluoridation taking into account the results of consultation. If it decides that the water should be fluoridated then it can legally instruct the Water Company to do so.

Following the request by Southampton City PCT, the Strategic Health Authority organised a major public and stakeholder consultation towards the end of 2008 on a proposal to increase the level of fluoride in the water supply in Southampton and parts of south west Hampshire. In early 2009, Members of the SHA Board, comprising Executive and Non-executive Directors, voted unanimously in favour of increasing the level of fluoride in the local water supply from 0.08 parts per million to 1ppm – the optimal level for tackling tooth decay.

To help the SHA make an informed decision on the issue, Board members received an independent report providing an analysis of over 10,200 responses received during the consultation along with the results of a phone survey of over 2,000 people. The Board also received presentations from representatives of Southampton City PCT the organisation with responsibility for assessing local health need and Hampshire against Fluoridation – the local anti-fluoridation campaign group. Following the presentations Professor John Newton, Regional Director of Public Health for NHS South Central and an epidemiologist, gave his professional view of the scientific evidence.

The SHA Board was satisfied that water fluoridation at 1ppm is a safe and effective way to tackle tooth decay in Southampton, and that the health benefits outweighed all other arguments against water fluoridation. The Board was satisfied that, based on existing research, water fluoridation is a safe and effective way to improve dental health. It is something which has been added to the water supply in parts of the UK including Birmingham for many years, and despite the best public health monitoring available no significant health problems have been identified.

The Board of South Central Strategic Health Authority subsequently decided, on 26 February 2009, to formally instruct Southern Water to fluoridate the local water supply. As a consequence of a number of legal discussions and debates, including a period of judicial review it did not issue the formal instruction to Southern Water to proceed to add fluoride to the water in Southampton and SW Hampshire until 31 March 2010.

On 16th June 2011, leave to appeal against the outcome of the judicial review was refused and the process of fluoridating the water in Southampton will proceed. It is likely to be several months before the necessary plant and machinery is constructed, operational and ready to commence the process of adding fluoride to the water supply.

The issue was considered by the Portsmouth City Teaching PCT in late 2007 and again in 2008. After a long debate, the PCT Board decided, on the casting vote of the Chair, not to proceed with a proposal to request the Strategic Health Authority to undertake a feasibility study and public consultation in Portsmouth. It decided instead to wait and observe and learn from the process taking place in Southampton and that it would reconsider its position in the light of that learning.

Subsequently, the Secretary of State has instigated a wholesale reorganisation of the NHS which will result in the abolition of both PCTs and StHAs in April 2013. Under the current legislation these are the only organisations that can take a decision to conduct a feasibility study and a public consultation. There is not now enough time between now and April 2013 for those two things to happen and so there will not be any reconsideration by the PCT in Portsmouth or the new PCT Cluster Board for Hampshire and IOW of fluoridation of the water consumed in Portsmouth.

In the future, new legislation will have to be introduced, probably in the Health & Social Care Bill currently going through Parliament to establish the future legal process. It is anticipated that there will be a greater emphasis on Councillors being involved in the initial decision making and it is likely the new Health & Well being Board will have a significant role. Until all that new legal architecture and the new processes are understood and in place, there will no initiative to fluoridate the water in Portsmouth City.

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