The debate to add fluoride to drinking water in Canadian cities

What is this research about? This essay is about the controversy and debate of fluoride in drinking water. Fluoride is added to drinking water because fluoride lowers the rate of tooth decay.

What did the researchers do? The author looked at the history of fluoride debates in four Canadian cities: Winnipeg, Toronto, Calgary and Montreal.

What did the researchers find? General trends in fluoridation include:

- When put to a referendum vote, fluoridation was more likely to fail than pass
- Fluoridation was more likely to pass in the 1950s and early 1960s than after this time because of more concern about health and environment issues of new technology
- Fewer communities have fluoridated drinking water now than in the 1970s and 1980s

What you need to know: Canadian cities have different histories of adding fluoride to drinking water. There are groups that support fluoridation and groups that oppose fluoridation. There are various reasons that make a community more likely to fluoridate their drinking water. Understanding the fluoride issue can help us understand the debates over other health and technology issues.

How can you use this research? Policymakers & Governments working in public health and oral health can learn about the history of the fluoride issue in Canada and use this information when working in the area of fluoridation.

Consumers and citizens groups can use this information to learn the history of both sides of the fluoride debate.

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What did the researchers find?

In Canada, municipal governments control the decision to fluoridate or not. The process to start fluoridation varies by province. It often involves a referendum or plebiscite (when all members of a community get to vote on the issue).

In Winnipeg, fluoridation passed easily in 1956. A referendum was not needed. There was little attention or support for the opposition against fluoride.

Toronto Council initially approved fluoridation in 1955. The Supreme Court of Canada overturned this when they ruled council did not have the power to make that decision. Council passed fluoridation a second time in 1961. This time it had to be put to a plebiscite vote because of opposition from citizens. Fluoridation passed the vote by 50.7% in 1962.

Calgary had four failed plebiscites (in 1957, 1961, 1966, and 1971) because of the work of anti-fluoride groups. Finally, in 1989, 53% of voted in favour in a plebiscite. In 1997 Calgary looked at the issue of fluoridation again. Another plebiscite passed with 55% of the voters in favour.

In Quebec, fluoridation only became a major issue in the 1970s. The Liberal provincial government supported fluoridation. They passed laws for province-wide fluoridation but it was never implemented.

There was a lot of resistance to fluoridation in Quebec. Fluoridation never passed in Montreal and few communities in Quebec have fluoridated drinking water.

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