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Citizens for Safe Drinking Water

 

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## **The Echo**

**Cape Town South Africa**

December 2001

Dentists in the Fish Hoek area are worried about the proposed introduction of fluoride into the city's water, saying its systemic use could be dangerous for teeth and bones.

Janel Welgemoed, who has a practise in the Long Beach Mall, said while she understood Government's need to protect the poorer communities from caries (tooth decay), water fluoridation was not the answer. "For the average citizen, the use of toothpaste and dental preparations are enough and these don't enter the blood stream. Putting fluoride in the water is dangerous and no-one can guage how much is entering the body. I will certainly be using a water purifier, if the city goes ahead with fluoridation," she said.

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Malcolm Ross, who practises in Muizenberg, said leafy green vegetables contained fluoride and so did tea. "I have mixed feelings about the introduction of fluoride into the water. There may be a tendency to overdosing. If fluoride is already being absorbed by the body from a variety of sources (toothpaste, vegetables etc) and then it is added to the water supply, it could mean there will be overdosing. At the least it will cause the teeth to become mottled and in severe cases bone deformity," he said.

He pointed out that although the body does excrete excess fluoride, "it comes out slower than it goes in".

Yvonne Staniforth, the headmistress of Star of the Sea said she had not read up enough to comment authoritatively. "Personally I wouldn't want it for the children in my school, I don't think it would help them," she said.

The city's water is to be fluoridised within the next two years, even though the process is complex and expensive.

A report compiled by Arne Singels, the head of the Unicity's bulk water department, said the potential for fluoride over-dosage made it imperative that there was strict continuous monitoring of the dosing equipment settings, frequent accurate sampling of the water and chemical analyses. This should be done by well motivated, trained process controllers, who had qualifications far in excess of the current situation at water plants.

According to the regulations set out by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, a class three operator was needed to meet the requirements, which the city's water department did not have enough of. Those who did have the qualifications had been promoted to management positions where their skills and experience were better utilised.

"It takes not just academic qualifications but on-the-job experience to rise from a class two to class three operator. This takes time. We can begin fluorodising the water at plants when operators reach class three status and will apply for exemptions at plants where there are no suitably trained staff," said Mr Singels.

According to the report, a lack of fluoride in the soil and surface water had been a concern to the dental section of the Department of Health for many years. Correct fluoridation in the drinking water would decrease the incidence of dental caries, especially in the poorer communities. For users the possibility of over-dosage was remote in the short term, he said.

The chemicals used for fluoridation are: sodium fluoride, fluorosilicic acid, sodium fluorosilicate. They are hazardous and need to be treated and stored carefully. A dosage of .7mgs per litre is all that is needed to provide adequate protection from caries.

In terms of financing the fluoridation of the water, the initial cost to install the systems at all 11 water treatment plants is R11-million and a further R10-million annually will be needed for the chemicals. This will have to be paid for by users. It will probably not amount to more than one cent per kilolitre on monthly water bills.

The Unicity council has set aside R4-million towards the project on the 2002/3 capital budget.

There is still a chance for water users to comment on the process and queries can be sent to Mr Singels at fax number (021) 487-2592.