

# FLUORIDATION

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## Grassroots Political Action by Pinellas County Dentists Gets Results

By Johnny Johnson Jr., DMD, MS

Late in 2011, by a 4-3 vote, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners decided to cease fluoridating the water supply for more than 700,000 residents served by our county's water system. This unprecedented decision was made on Oct. 4, 2011 during a budget workshop without prior public notification. Fluoridation was introduced as a budgetary concern, and the discussion quickly deteriorated into a loud, boisterous affair with a large group opposed to fluoridation claiming a slew of medical ills, wrongly alleging that fluoride was a toxic waste, threatening litigation and making host of other bogus claims. I was one of a group of local dentists and physicians attending the meeting.

While not prepared for a detailed presentation defending the efficacy of fluoride at the budget workshop, we were able to present the commissioners with credible scientific data supporting the impact, safety and cost-effectiveness provided by optimal water fluoridation. However, after nearly four hours of mostly negative public comments orchestrated by an intensely organized opposition, four of the seven commissioners stated that they sensed that a large percentage of our residents were opposed to it, and that they should no longer be making the decision for our citizens. In less than one minute, they voted to cease the proven and safe public health measure of fluoridation, believing the unsubstantiated pseudoscience used by those opposing fluoridation. Apparently fearing the threats of harm that fluoridation was alleged to cause, and asking for more studies to be done, the commissioners turned their backs on available scientific information from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), the American Medical Association (AMA), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Dental Association (ADA), the U.S. Surgeon General, and more than 100 national and international organizations that recognize the public health benefits of community water fluoridation for preventing dental decay. Worse yet, with their haphazard decision, the commissioners decided to deprive our residents — most tragically the poor who are least likely to receive regular dental care — of the cavity-reducing benefits of community water fluoridation.

I was outraged! How could our elected officials, who should know or have access to our scientific community's resources and recommendations, ignore them? After all, I was raised to think that those in charge protected the rest of us, just as the police, firefighters and other such groups do. Unfortunately, I was naïve to expect the same level of responsibility in others that we as dentists give to our patients. Hypothetically, would any of us offer advice on the safety of electrical wiring inside an airplane based on emails we were receiving from folks who oppose jets, or would we consult with the

Please see FLUORIDATION, 58

“When elected officials are willing and want to hear the credible evidence behind fluoridation's safety, they can be approached with the information that will allow them to make an informed decision.”



Waving signs to raise awareness of pro-fluoride Pinellas County commission candidate, Charlie Justice,, from left to right, are: Upper Pinellas County Dental Association President, Oscar Menendez, DDS, Karen Hodge, RDH, MHSc and Johnny Johnson, DMD, MS.

FLUORIDATION from 57

appropriate authorities in this field? We would, of course, do our due diligence to assure that we got it right.

One of the four commissioners who voted to cease fluoridation had previously been a member of the Florida Legislature. He was a “friend of dentistry,” and we had met at a couple of dental meetings where he was invited as a guest. Being a prodigy of Dr. James Bawden at the University of North Carolina — who also happened to be one of the foremost experts on fluoride in the world — gave me a strong background in fluoride and fluoridation. I also had done my research project on infant formulas and fluoride concentrations for my Master of Science degree with him. As such, I reached out to this commissioner to attempt to discuss his concerns on the safety of fluoridation based on the credible science, not what he’d been receiving in emails.

After discussing his concerns voiced at the workshop, we reviewed the information that he’d been given. It was incorrect information circulated in emails by the anti-fluoridationists. Through our discussion, he understood that he’d been given flawed information on which to base his decision. However, when asked if he would reverse his vote, his answer was no, as he felt it was a decision best made by referendum. He, like others who voted against it, perceived that a large percentage of our residents were against drinking fluoridated water, and that he shouldn’t be making that decision for them.

At the same time — and in response to this surprise vote by our county commission — local, state, and national dentists and other groups began organizing a sincere effort to provide the credible science to the commissioners who voted to cease fluoridation. We hoped to convince them to reverse their decisions, based on the safety and effectiveness of water fluoridation we presented. Since I had previously reached out to one of the commissioners, I was asked to be the spokesperson/liason for this group and for our Pinellas County dental organizations. Our strategy was straightforward: it was a non-partisan scientific approach to educate these commissioners about the safety and effectiveness through 67 years of fluoridation experience. I personally contacted all four commissioners, and they all agreed to meet and discuss fluoridation with me. Our initial meetings were one-on-one and subsequently, based on my recommendation, they also agreed to meet with two national fluoridation experts to further address their scientific questions.

The experts that agreed to meet with the commissioners were Drs. Michael “Mike” Easley of Tallahassee, Fla. and Robert “Pete” Crawford of Tennessee. Both of these

gentlemen unselfishly gave their time at no cost, to travel to Pinellas County from their respective locations to offer their expertise to the commissioners.

Meetings and discussions with the dissenting commissioners spanned a 4-5 month period, including more than 16 hours of face-to-face time in private meetings in their offices. At their request, Dr. Easley spent hundreds of hours preparing a customized Fluoridation Reference Manual that was more than 500 pages long. This manual documented the credible, scientific basis of optimally fluoridated water, the positions of the CDC, ADA, AMA, AAP, WHO and other supporting organizations. Countless emails were exchanged with each commissioner to help them “decode” the science in professional journal articles, as well as to discuss why the resources provided by those in opposition lacked the validity of accepted science.

At the same time that we were working with the Pinellas County commissioners, three other communities within Pinellas County were facing fluoridation issues. Pinellas Park, in central Pinellas County, was being cut off from fluoridation because it purchased its water from the county. Having a sizable population of families in the most at-risk groups, the city council decided to look at beginning its own fluoridation process. Pinellas Park voted to begin its own fluoridation process at roughly half the cost of what it cost Pinellas County to fluoridate its water. The anti-fluoridationists were present at the meeting, but their objections failed to convince the council to reject the move to fluoridate. They voted unanimously to begin fluoridation late in 2012 or early 2013. Their hope was that the county would reverse its position on fluoridation.

During this same period, the city of Dunedin held a city commission meeting to decide whether to continue to fluoridate their water. Again, the anti-fluoridationists were out in full force. In addition to this, they had been flooding the city commission with negative emails touting the hazards and ills caused by fluoridation. In spite of their efforts, the commission voted 3-2 to continue to fluoridate their reverse osmosis water system. As a side note, their mayor voted against continuing to fluoridate; he had been swayed by the opposition to look at their “science” as it stacked up against the credible science of fluoridation.

He asked for further discussion of the fluoridation issue at that meeting from those in attendance. Following up on his request, area dentists and I met with him to go through the scientific support of fluoridation, as well as the misinformation that he’d been given. After reading the information he was given, and meeting with dentists who brought discussions forward in a non-challenging way, he reversed his stance on fluoridation. I realized at that point the importance of reaching out to our leaders, even though they had voted against fluoridation.

When they are willing and want to hear the credible evidence behind fluoridation’s safety, they can be approached with the information that will allow them to make an informed decision.

What a wonderful experience that was for me.

Another Pinellas County city, Tarpon Springs, was planning a discussion on fluoridating their water plant before construction began. A previous city commission had voted not to fluoridate their water supply. However, the current city commission wished to revisit that decision after the plant’s construction had been delayed. One of the commissioners had asked that fluoridation be reconsidered, especially since their water presently was purchased from Pinellas County’s water system.

It was Tarpon Springs that educated me on what occurs behind the scenes in the fluoridation issues. Posting everything they received — and I do mean everything — to their city’s webpage under a fluoridation link was the most impressive part of their process as they gathered information from experts and the community. Every single email, solicitation, letter, etc. was transparently posted on their website, and this was the first time that I was privy to what the opposition was sending these commissioners. The New York State Coalition Opposing Fluoridation (NYSCOF) was a leading hound dog in providing junk science to these commissioners. It didn’t take me long to realize where the Pinellas County

Please see FLUORIDATION, 60

FLUORIDATION from 59

commissioners had gotten their objections from at their workshop. Every single point they had stated had been taken directly from the false information that the NYSCOF was sending to the Tarpon Springs Commission. Knowing this, I enlisted the help of Drs. Crawford and Easley, and ADA fluoridation expert, Jane McGinley to counter and debunk what the NYSCOF had sent them.

In the final tally, the city voted unanimously to fluoridate their plant when it came online.

Meanwhile, back at the Pinellas County Commission, our group had provided overwhelming evidence supporting community water fluoridation, and discrediting the opposition's claims, to the commissioners who had voted to cease it. These commissioners had all of the information they needed to make an educated decision regarding the scientific validity of fluoridation. I asked each of the four dissenting commissioners if he or she would now vote in favor of community water fluoridation; their answers were a unanimous no. Originally they said their decision was based on a lack of definitive scientific evidence "proving" its safety beyond question, but now they each stated that they felt less government is what people wanted. They did not want to be in the position of making health decisions for the citizens they serve.

At this point, our group felt that we had exhausted all our efforts to educate them. In April 2012, two of the four commissioners were running for re-

## Pro-fluoridation Group's Efforts:

- Contacted Janet Long and Charlie Justice to support their pro-fluoride campaigns.
- Provided fluoridation facts to aid candidates in countering the email attacks they received.
- Elicited different local organizations concerned with oral health (i.e., local public dental association, dental hygiene association, nonprofits) to aid in the grassroots campaign process with letters of support and campaign contributions.
- Emailed members asking that they show their support with a symbolic contribution of \$39 to each of the candidates. One dollar represented the investment in fluoridation that in turn would have saved \$38 in dental treatment costs during the year it was absent from our water.
- Encouraged our members to speak with their patients and hand out campaign information at their offices, as well as send out email blasts.
- Hung political signs around town and in front of our offices. One dentist even erected a billboard on US 19 promoting the two candidates and fluoridation.
- We waved candidate signs on street corners, and I turned my truck into a mobile campaign billboard.
- Organized fundraisers at our district dental association meetings.
- Interviewed with the local major newspaper and broadcast media and contributed to stories to help keep fluoridation at the forefront of the commissioner races.
- Enlisted a diverse group of community stakeholders to speak on the benefits of fluoride at the county commission meetings, rather than solely the dental community.

election. These two had consistently misused and purposefully misquoted the CDC and ADA's recommendations on the use of fluoridated water with infant formula, as well as fluorides with children under the age of eight. Both of these claims had been covered in-depth multiple times with the two commissioners during meetings. Therefore, our group decided to become politically active to protect our residents and return fluoridated water to them as soon as possible.

Two former state legislators, Janet Long and Charlie Justice, decided to run for the Pinellas County Commission, opposing two of the commissioners who voted to cease fluoridation. Both Rep. Long and Sen. Justice became the pro-fluoride candidates. As dental professionals, my colleagues and I disdain getting our offices and patients involved in a political race. However, cessation of community water fluoridation was a direct blow to the health of our community, so we could not sit idly by. Allowing our

community's children, especially those most in need, to be subjected to more cavities, more pain and suffering, more missed days from school due to pain, and decreased ability to concentrate, all in the name of politicizing a non-political issue, was unforgivable. Fortunately for our community, the candidates who were able to rationally assess the issue won, and the commission voted 6-1 to reinstate community water fluoridation in March 2013.

Throughout this entire process, it became increasingly clear to me that what I'd heard from organized dentistry for years was truer than I cared to believe. I was a private practice dentist who was content to practice within my four walls and to let others fight these battles. After all, that's what they chose to do when they took positions within organized dentistry, right? That's what the ADA was there for, right? Well, I was wrong. These dentists have practices as well and are giving their time to promote the health and future of our profession. They don't have any more time than any of us do to fight these battles alone. My complacent approach was one that so many of us justify and I am not pointing fingers. Instead, I want you to learn from our ordeal and hopefully gain insight into how to circumvent these issues in your own communities.

First, whether your community is fluoridated or not, and whether you are aware of efforts to keep it unfluoridated or to defluoridate it, it is indeed happening — constantly! Even now, after our county commissioners have voted to resume fluoridation, these groups are beating their doors down with false emails and “new” junk science. I like to refer to their claims as science fiction, because that's exactly what it is. These highly organized groups, primarily NYSCOF and the Fluoride Action Network (FAN), are pounding away at our elected officials and our patients. Their intent is to scare the pants off politicians and to immobilize our patients and parents by making them think that they are harming their children's health, IQ and development permanently. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Secondly, we have to become familiar with our elected officials. I had never been politically active on any level prior to this ordeal. However, my colleagues and I could not sit idly by and allow our residents, especially the needy, to be harmed by a self-serving decision. We had to get busy, not only to try to educate those who opposed fluoridation about the *real* science behind it, but to make contact with our elected officials in favor of it. We needed to reassure these officials that their decisions were based in sound science. They were backed by the CDC, ADA, AMA, AAP and many other scientific and consumer organizations. Further, we needed our officials to know that we care about what goes on in our communities, not only when it comes to fluoride, but in other issues as well. By doing this, we become accessible to them as resources when dental issues arise.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most important, we absolutely *must* educate our own dentists about fluorides and fluoridation issues. The ADA and state societies advocate that the

public discuss fluoridation issues with their dentists or physicians. But to be quite frank, too many of us are not well enough versed to field these questions. How could we be? The opposition is constantly cherry picking tidbits out of old and new scientific literature, throwing them into a kitchen blender and then pouring out the junk science fiction that they've concocted on an unsuspecting public. If I didn't know better, heck, I'd even believe it. They're so convincing that they'll send us back to our experts for advice.

Believe me when I say that you have to get involved. I was no expert. I didn't even like to get up in front of a crowd of dentists and speak, let alone an Internet-televised county commission meeting. What if I misspoke? What if I froze up? Well, at least I gave it a try. And I had other dentists, physicians, dental hygienists, assistants, and citizens who were all pro-fluoride there to back me up. You won't be alone in your efforts. But you absolutely cannot let those opposed to fluoridation harm our families and friends with their destructive efforts. You have more support and resources available to you than you can imagine. Just make the effort and step outside of your box. You will be surprised at how much difference your efforts will make. And if you have any doubts, you can call on me anytime. I'm an average person, and I made a difference.

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