

This response was submitted to the consultation held by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics on *Public Health: ethical issues* between May and September 2006. The views expressed are solely those of the respondent(s) and not those of the Council.

J Parfitt

Dear MrSchmidt

Public Health:- Ethical Issues; Response to the Council's Consultation Paper

I am sorry that as the Council's paper only recently came to my attention I have been able to do no more than jot down a few thoughts, mainly on the fluoridation of the public water supply. I have not had time to consider the interconnected roles of government, industry, bodies like the BMA and BDA which are clearly important and many of which the public cannot directly influence even though in some ways it is easier now than ever before for individuals to *inform* themselves on scientific matters. I am sorry to say that I believe public trust in governmental and industrial pronouncements on matters of public health is low, largely because of the reputation this government has achieved (whether deserved or not) for misleading them.

Additional topics which should be considered:-

A most notable omission from the paper is that of the risks and alleged benefits of genetically modified foods, which have met with considerable public resistance in the UK despite forceful recommendation from no less a person than Mr Blair. His Scientific Adviser, then Sir Robert May, admitted to me afterwards in a letter that no monitoring of their effects on human beings had been undertaken before they were introduced into the diet of millions. As far as I am aware there are still no long-term studies being undertaken, six years after the unprecedented campaign of vilification against the respected researcher Dr Pusztai for daring to say in public that he wouldn't eat them.

Allied topics for investigation are the foolish genetic modification of food plants to produce drugs, and their planting in open fields where they will inevitably contaminate unmodified plants of the same species (fortunately not yet in the UK), and the continued legal use of poisonous agricultural sprays derived from nerve gases in what is called "conventional" farming, with no precautions against the spray drifting into adjacent dwellings and public buildings.

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The continuing use of mercury amalgam fillings in the UK to repair decayed teeth against growing scientific evidence that this highly poisonous metal, easily absorbed into the body, is a cause of long-term ill effects. The attitude of the British Dental Association would bear investigation as a case study into the interaction between their responsibility to the public and their desire to protect the interests of their members, presumably against claims for compensation.

The general case I would put forward is that once a connection is known or suspected between the use of a substance and harm to the public, the government has a responsibility to publicise whatever scientific research has been done on the topic, to encourage or commission further research and where an overwhelming case has been made, to pass laws to reduce or eliminate its use. Unfortunately powerful commercial interests can oppose this desirable state of affairs, as was the case with tobacco whose relationship with lung cancer was at least suspected by the industry more than fifty years ago, but suppressed.

Fluoridation of public water supplies

Placing a discussion of fluoridation of public water supplies in a section of the paper entitled "*Supplementation of food and water*" is grossly misleading. The text makes it clear what the Committee means by supplementation of food. It involves adding constituents to it which are necessary to human nutrition and which for one reason or another are missing from the particular food which is being consumed.

This is not the case with the addition of fluorine compounds to water. Absence of fluorine from the solid or liquid diet is not the cause of dental caries in children or adults, nor is it known that significant quantities of fluorine compounds play a vital part in our metabolic processes (unlike, for instance, iodine). Addition of fluorine compounds to the public water supply cannot therefore be logically lumped in with "*supplementation*"; its role must be defined as *medication* to cure or alleviate a problem caused by other factors. It is surprising that while members of the public recognise this distinction, an eminent committee chose to ignore it.

Given, therefore that fluorine compounds are to be added to the public water supply for medicinal purposes, some objections are:-

1. The fluorine compounds it is proposed to add to the water supply have never been through the stringent tests for efficacy and side effects which all medicines must pass before their use on human beings is permitted. They do not appear on the list of permitted drugs; their use is therefore unlawful.
2. It is a well-known legal and ethical principle that adults are free to submit to medical procedures or not, as they choose, and that unless there is an over-riding medical reason for the use of a procedure, for instance the danger of death or of spreading a serious infection, that they are free to make this choice for their children. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, choose not to accept any procedure which involves blood transfusion. There have been well-publicised individual legal battles when doctors thought it vital to submit their children to such treatment. Normally the carrying out of a medical procedure against one's wishes legally constitutes an assault. Adding fluorine compounds to the public water supply prevents people from exercising their choice not to be medicated for a non-lethal condition. It is sometimes

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held that people who object to fluoridation may avoid the problem by drinking bottled water or installing reverse osmosis filtration equipment. The expense makes these alternatives impossible for most people, and drinking bottled water does not address the absorption of fluorides through the skin in bathing or showering. What people require of the public water supply is that it shall be safe to drink and use for household purposes, not that it shall be a vehicle for forced medication. People who wish to treat their own or their children's teeth with fluorine compounds may do so by topical application in liquid form or by using universally available toothpastes.

3. Although the dosage of one part in a million has been held to be "safe", there is not only no evidence that this is so, but there is no way to calculate what actual daily dose consumers will receive. Not only does the amount of tap water individuals consume vary greatly; if food manufacturing companies use in their products water from the public supply and if, for example, it is concentrated by boiling, baking or evaporation the products may well contain a higher proportion of fluorine than was present in the water. In addition there is an indeterminate dose from popular, heavily advertised toothpastes. It is quite difficult in my local supermarket to find a brand which is not fluoridated. What responsible doctor would prescribe a drug not knowing or recommending how much of it the patient should take?

4. Being subjected to regular doses of fluorine compounds has never been held to be of significant value to anyone whose teeth are already formed. The only effects reported in adults are bad. It is complete folly, in the absence of indisputable evidence that fluorine compounds are harmless to human metabolism, to subject the entire population to regular dosage with an unlawful chemical in the supposed interests of only its youngest members.

5. The slippery slope! If this measure of unavoidable mass medication is forced through due to public apathy or government intransigence, one must ask what safeguards will then exist against an only slightly more authoritarian government putting other substances into the water supply. Strategic Health Authorities are no safeguard since their members are appointees of the Department of Health and would doubtless do as they were told.

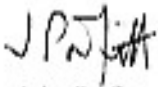
6. There are alternatives to fluoridation of our drinking water. As dental caries in the young is known to be largely produced by poor nutrition and a bad diet in mother and child, improvement of the diet and better dental care for the poorer section of the population is both ethically and clinically preferable to mass medication. However, in many areas it is now almost impossible to obtain dental care from the NHS. It leads one to suppose that the government is determined to enforce the alternative of dosing the water supply because it is cheaper and easier than providing good dental services and trying to reform the national diet. Fluoridation would also have the advantage of not antagonising the manufacturers of hugely profitable and forcefully advertised sugar confectionery and acidic soft drinks who could exert pressure on any government which tried to reduce their consumption.

7. The paper cites that "Numerous national and international health institutions, including the WHO, have endorsed the practice of water fluoridation". This is of not the slightest significance unless accompanied by publicly available *evidence*. Without this (and as you mention in another part of the paper, the York study found that "little

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high quality research [into the value of fluoridation] has been undertaken"), *belief* in its value, from no matter how authoritative a person or official body, is theology, not science. In this respect the words of Richard Feynman are of significance. Nobel laureate in physics, he was the only pure scientist on the committee enquiring into the of the "Challenger" space shuttle disaster. The other members of the committee including the Chairman were all in some way beholden to the US government which tried to suppress Feynman's minority – and correct – report. Having shown that NASA's "official management" claimed the space shuttle was a thousand times safer than their own engineers' estimate, he said:- "for a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled."*

Yours sincerely



John Parfitt

Enc:- Completed Respondent's form

Copies to:- HRII The Prince of Wales; The Bristol Water Company; The Soil Association; The National Pure Water Association; Georgina Downs; T Cobley

* Richard P Feynman, "The pleasure of finding things out", Allen Lane, 2000, pp 168-9