

Council accused of cheating

The Fluoride Action Network (FANNZ) claims to have caught Far North District Council CEO David Edmunds working behind the scenes with the Northland DHB to sway last month's fluoridation vote in Kaikohe, while conducting supposedly neutral public consultation.

The "subterfuge" was revealed in an email obtained under the Official Information Act, Fluoride Action spokesperson Mary Byrne said. She claimed that Mr Edmunds had tried to co-ordinate a meeting between the DHB and Ngapuhi, so the DHB would influence the iwi to vote for fluoridation. Two weeks before, in a written reply to concerns over the integrity of the process, he stated that the council was endeavouring to undertake an impartial survey.

"That may have been the intention of councillors, but clearly it was not the

intention of Mr Edmunds," Ms Byrne said.

The contract with the Ministry of Health required a referendum, and on February 11 the council voted for a binding vote. But Mr Edmunds, she said, decided to organise a non-binding 'survey'.

"By calling it a survey, he used this as justification for avoiding Internal Affairs Department requirements for transparency in local body voting," she said, adding that the voting form and instructions were worded with a clear bias towards a vote for fluoridation, that Mr Edmunds had refused to allow voters their statutory right to appoint a scrutineer, and council officers had been allowed to open votes without oversight by the JP appointed as scrutineer.

Mayor Wayne Brown had stated that the council would take a "hands-

off" approach to fluoride information, leaving it to those for and against to arrange their own, but voting papers had been sent out without prior notice, so fluoridation opponents had not been able to prepare an information release to match the consultation timeframe.

The email relating to Ngapuhi was dated April 8, Ms Byrne claiming that, in the last week or two of voting, DHB "henchmen" went door-knocking, trying to pressure people to vote, "and vote for fluoridation."

FANNZ understood that votes were processed by council staff as they arrived, "so it would seem highly likely the CEO knew the vote was going against fluoridation, and then gave this information, or advice based on it, to the DHB, so they knew they had to ramp up their taxpayer-funded campaign."

Community feedback indicated

strong feeling against fluoridation, she added, and if the count did not show a majority in opposition to it FANNZ would demand an independent vote, in conjunction with this year's local body elections.

Undertaking

Mr Edmunds rejected Ms Byrne's claims, saying he had given Ngapuhi an undertaking that the iwi would be included in any consultation on fluoridation "the last time around, when they felt they had not had adequate opportunity to comment."

At his regular monthly meeting with the runanga, he was advised that it had not had a presentation on the subject of fluoridation from the DHB, and would like such an opportunity. He had subsequently asked the DHB if it would be prepared to meet that request.

"I do not consider this subterfuge, or

an attempt to influence voting," he said. Nor had he decided to organise a non-binding survey.

The council had voted to consult and to abide by the majority vote while the intention of demanding an 'independent' vote later in the year suggested that FANNZ would consider the survey result valid if it opposed fluoridation and invalid if it didn't.

The survey questions were not biased, simply asking respondents to declare whether they supported or opposed the fluoridation of council owned water supplies, and the claim that papers had been sent out without prior notice was also incorrect.

The council resolved to conduct the survey at a public meeting on February 11, after advising interested parties of that meeting. The decision to consult had been publicised, while the form were not mailed out until February 26