

# Fluoride issue may go to city referendum

By CHRIS MORRIS

RESIDENTS across Dunedin may be asked to decide on the future of the city's fluoridated water supply, despite concerns a referendum could be hijacked by "extreme" interests.

The option of city-wide consultation on the chemical's use in drinking water, which aims to prevent tooth decay, is among several options to be considered by the Dunedin City Council on November 3.

However, a report by council policy team manager Nicola Johnston, to go before councillors at next week's meeting, warned of potential fish-hooks associated with relying on the results of a referendum.

Otago and Southland District Health Board referendums held during last year's Vote Fluoride campaign suffered from low voter turnout, and Public Health South officials believed results "do not necessarily reflect the views of the majority of the community", she said.

"If the community as a whole is not well informed, one or more interest groups may significantly influence the decision.

"The scientific arguments relating to fluoridation are complex and it is the view of Public Health South that the arguments can be easily clouded by emotive publicity."

Instead, her report recommended consultation through printed and telephone surveys and focus groups — as with the council's rubbish survey — as "most likely to give a representative view".

The process should also be separated from the council's long-term council community plan (LTCCP) process, she recommended.

PHS medical officer of health Dr John Holmes, who is overseas, and PHS senior public health dentist Dr Dorothy Boyds could not be reached for comment yesterday.

## Mosgiel seeks third meeting

By EDITH SCHOFIELD

ORGANISERS of a Mosgiel public meeting about fluoridation were "pleasantly surprised" at a strong turnout and even more surprised when people asked them to organise a third meeting about the issue.

Co-organiser Dennis Enright about 70 people attended Tuesday's meeting, which was organised after people had to be turned away from a previous meeting two weeks earlier. Organisers had been caught short then, when at least 100 people turned up and they ran out of sitting and standing space for more.

When people started talking about three meetings in a row, even he was taken aback at how much sentiment there was about the issue, Mr Enright said.

"People were overwhelmingly opposed to the idea of fluoridation and wondering what could be done."

Ministry of Health chief dental officer Dr Robin Whyman said when contacted the ministry had no policy on referendums, "as it is up to each local authority to decide how best to consult with their community".

Councillors at next week's meeting would be asked to decide whether consultation was targeted — surveying only residents in areas not yet receiving fluoridated water — or city-wide.

Councillors would also need to decide which of two options would be put forward for public consultation — whether to continue existing fluoridation, and introduce the chemical to untreated water supplies, or whether or not fluoridation should be

Dunedin City Councillors were invited to the meeting, although only Cr Fliss Butcher fronted up and five put in apologies. However, councillors were given short notice about the meeting and he was asked to organise another meeting at a time which would suit them, Mr Enright said.

There was a feeling councillors were not listening and people wanted more dialogue with them about the issue, he said.

Councillors will be discussing a recommendation to allow for public input about extending fluoridation to non-fluoridated water supplies through the next annual plan and long-term council community plan on November 3.

Mosgiel Taieri Community Board members have indicated to council they would like to see a referendum held in the town before there was any move to change to fluoridation of the water supply.

discontinued altogether.

The cost of consultation could range from \$44,500 to \$140,000, depending on the method used.

The report follows a decision by the council's infrastructure services committee, earlier this month, supporting consultation with residents through the LTCCP process.

The meeting saw heated debate between councillors. Cr Fliss Butcher evoked memories of thalidomide while warning against "mass medication" by "men in white coats", while Cr Michael Guest derided fluoride opponents as "akin to quacks and snake oil merchants".

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