

No timeframe for fluoridating Christchurch's water, while misinformation grows



Chris Skelton/Stuff

Dr Arun Natarajan, left, a paediatric dental specialist at Christchurch Hospital, performs extractions on a 3-year-old child who underwent anaesthesia to have 10 rotten teeth removed.

Work to [fluoridate the city's water supplies appears to be in limbo](#) despite calls for urgency by dental experts and the growing tide of misinformation against its health benefits.

Experts are dismayed Christchurch was not included in outgoing director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield's order this week for [14 local authorities to add fluoride](#) to some or all of their water supplies.

It was the first time the director-general had used new powers under the Health (Fluoridation of Drinking Water) Amendment Act 202, which took the decision about fluoridation away from local councils.

Bloomfield said the directives were limited to 14 councils because the work to fluoridate their supplies would fit within the available funding "envelope" of about \$11 million.

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* [Christchurch infrastructure design makes fluoridation 'cost significantly more'](#)

* [Fluoridation for healthier teeth in Christchurch tops \\$60m - and could be eight years away](#)

It will cost \$63m and take at least four years to fluoridate Christchurch's 50 pump stations, according to city council assessments – information that was provided to the Ministry of Health in December, council head of three waters Helen Beaumont said.

The ministry "is looking at what further financial support might be needed and might be available in the future for further local authorities to fluoridate their water supply", a spokesperson said.

In April, Christchurch councillors unanimously agreed [the Government should fund all fluoridation costs](#), and mayor Lianne Dalziel said she would seek a meeting with the

director-general to discuss the city's situation.

Earlier this month, Beaumont said the council was "working closely" with the ministry to make it aware of Christchurch's situation. However, on Friday, she said the council had still not met with the ministry to discuss the issue.

KAI SCHWOERER/Stuff

Dr John Malcolm, New Zealand Dental Association spokesperson, says the benefits of fluoride will be clear in the long-term.

"Once the new director-general of health is in place the mayor will write to invite them to discuss the matter with the council," Beaumont said.

Paediatric dental surgeon Arun Natarajan said "enough is enough".

"Really, regarding the council ... we now need to see action faster.

"The Government has done their bit, but obviously they need to extend the funding."

The issue was urgent and fluoridation needed to be a priority for local and central government, he said.

ROBERT KITCHIN/Stuff

Director-general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield announces he has directed 14 councils to fluoridate their water supplies at his last media briefing on Thursday.

New Zealand Dental Association Canterbury spokesperson and Ilam Dental dentist Dr John Malcolm said he appreciated fluoridation was harder to implement in Christchurch, but he was concerned it would “get put into the too hard basket”.

Fluoridation had a proven cumulative effect on dental health but did not have a “switch on, switch off benefit”.

“If we put fluoridation in the water tomorrow we’re not going to see a result next week, we will see it five years on ... and five years after that even more.”

He said the measure was extremely important in protecting against dental decay across the whole population, and particularly for people in areas of high deprivation.

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Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa is a researcher with The Disinformation Project. He says there has been a rise in disinformation about fluoridation this year.

Fluoridation [adjusts the natural level of fluoride](#) in a drinking water supply to between 0.7 ppm (parts-per-million) and 1.0 ppm – the optimal and safe amount to provide protection against tooth decay.

Meanwhile, misinformation about fluoridation is increasing across social media platforms, according to Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, a researcher at [The Disinformation Project](#).

“Across every imaginable metric, the number of posts,

engagement around each post, in any way you cut it, it has increased.

“It is all playing on people’s anxieties, suggesting that ingesting it or being introduced to it is harmful.”

Malcolm said he had noticed more patients expressing concerns and avoiding toothpaste with fluoride.



KAI SCHWOERER/Stuff

Christchurch City Council head of three waters Helen Beaumont says the council will work with the Ministry of Health over the cost of fluoridation.

“It’s often ‘I read an article on Facebook, or Instagram told me fluoride was harmful’.

“It’s very hard, as a healthcare professional, to combat misinformation because it becomes a belief system.”

Christchurch councillors also asked in April for more information about alternatives for “applying fluoride to children’s teeth”.

Beaumont said on Friday the council had not received this information from the Ministry of Health.

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Malcolm said there was no comparable alternative for achieving the benefits of fluoride for the whole population.

"Fluoride is not a magic pill, one exposure doesn't really make a difference, it's the frequency and the cumulative benefit."

Water fluoridation worked to prevent tooth decay in children, irrespective of their circumstances, he said.

"It reaches children whose parents aren't aware enough of good oral hygiene, to pass on good oral hygiene to their children."