

## Community Water Fluoridation

Approved February 2015

### Background

1. Tooth decay (dental caries) remains the single most common chronic disease among New Zealanders of all ages. Significant disparities exist in oral health status, with those of Māori and Pacific ethnicity and people from low-socioeconomic groups experiencing disproportionately high rates of tooth decay.
2. Fluoride has a protective effect against tooth decay by preventing demineralization of tooth enamel during attack by acid-producing plaque bacteria, fuelled by dietary sugars. Community fluoridation of water supplies is a safe, effective and cost-effective way to provide protection from tooth decay.<sup>1</sup>
3. Only around half the New Zealand population live in areas with fluoridated water supplies. New Zealand children living in fluoridated areas have about 40% less tooth decay than children living in non-fluoridated areas.<sup>2</sup>
4. The responsibility for community water fluoridation has historically been with local territorial authorities. Following litigation and interruptions to community water fluoridation by local authorities, Local Government New Zealand requested that central government take the lead and pass responsibility for community water fluoridation to the Director General of Health.

### Recommendations

1. The NZMA supports the expanded use of community water fluoridation to reduce the burden of oral disease and reduce health inequities in New Zealand.
2. Priority for community water fluoridation should be given to communities with a high prevalence of dental caries. Community water fluoridation is a significant healthy equity issue. While everyone benefits from fluoridation of our water supplies, this is particularly so for lower socio-economic communities.
3. Central government has a key role to play in facilitating the expanded use of community water fluoridation. We support a shift in responsibility for community water fluoridation from local territorial authorities to public health experts in the Ministry of Health and in District health Boards.
4. The NZMA supports informed discussion about the health benefits and risks, reduction of health inequalities, and cost savings of this important public health measure. We welcome the Ministry of Health's engagement with the public on this issue, including via websites such as [www.fluoridefacts.govt.nz](http://www.fluoridefacts.govt.nz).
5. The NZMA also supports other policy options to improve oral health in New Zealand.<sup>3</sup>

## References

1. Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (Auckland) & The Royal Society of New Zealand (Wellington). Health effects of water fluoridation: A review of the scientific evidence. August 2014. Available from <http://www.pmcsa.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/Health-effects-of-water-fluoridation-Aug2014.pdf>
2. Ministry of Health. Our Oral Health: Key findings of the 2009 New Zealand Oral Health Survey. Table 89. Wellington, December 2010: Ministry of Health. Available from <http://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/our-oral-health-2010.pdf>
3. Tackling Obesity. NZMA Policy Briefing. May 2014. Available from <http://www.nzma.org.nz/publications/tackling-obesity>; Smokefree New Zealand. NZMA Position Statement. July 2010. Available from [http://www.nzma.org.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/25516/Smokefree-New-Zealand-2010.pdf](http://www.nzma.org.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/25516/Smokefree-New-Zealand-2010.pdf)