

Fighting the Latest Challenge to Fluoridation in Oregon

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THE RESULTS OF CAMPAIGNS TO FLUORIDATE public water supplies have been widely reported in the public health literature (1-3). The insight that these reports provide into the operations of past fluoridation campaigns is useful to fluoridationists planning future campaign strategies. Cohen (1), Hahn (4), Plaut (5), and a number of other social scientists have described the demographic variables that influence people to vote for fluoridation legislation. Henderson and Gilliloy (6) have indicated the kinds of local governments that are likely to pass fluoridation measures. Other authors have outlined appropriate strategies to use in fluoridation campaigns (1,2,5,7-9), strategies that take into account proper timing, subjects to be stressed, and various approaches to take in countering the opponent's tactics. The recommendations in the literature on ways to conduct successful fluoridation campaigns have helped many communities seeking to fluoridate their water supplies. Recently, however, renewed efforts by antifluoridation forces necessitate that those of us supporting fluoridation carefully review our strategies.

In the past, most antifluoridation campaigns have been limited to local communities. Seldom have there been statewide antifluoridation efforts, and rarely has there been a campaign to prevent communities from voting to fluoridate their water supplies. Recently, however, local groups in Oregon and Washington, with the support of the National Health Federation, have managed to place statewide initiative measures on the ballot that would prohibit communities from fluoridating their water supplies. This shift in strategy should alert the proponents of fluoridation to the need to organize and be ready for future antifluoridation campaigns in their own States.

In this paper we describe recent attempts at fluoridation in Oregon and also seek to provide readers with a background for understanding the political climate in the State during recent efforts to pass an antifluoridation measure. We believe that the new approaches taken by the antifluoridation forces have surprised the proponents of fluoridation and have

made it necessary for its public health advocates to take part in a concerted effort to maintain fluoridation in the communities where fluoride is added to the water supply.

Recent Fluoridation History

By 1976, only Hawaii and Nevada had lower percentages of their populations enjoying the benefits of fluoridation than Oregon. Several unsuccessful attempts had been made in the Oregon State Legislature to pass a bill that would provide for statewide fluoridation. Also, the Oregon State Health Commission in 1975 had abruptly ordered statewide fluoridation. This move, however, was ill timed and took many legislators and the State Executive Office by surprise. The State Attorney General ruled that the health commission did not have the statutory authority to require fluoridation of public water systems. The proponents of fluoridation were thus left in a difficult situation. Unfortunately, the political sensitivities that an order to fluoridate might arouse had not been carefully considered. Nor had any attempt been made to conduct an educational campaign, an effort that might have strengthened the commission's position. The value of such a campaign has been described by Wallace and associates (10).

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This failure to achieve fluoridation by mandate underscores the necessity for planning in advance of acting.

In 1975, a group of Oregon health professionals and other concerned persons was organized in order to consider having a bill introduced in the State legislature mandating statewide fluoridation. The nucleus of the group was comprised of the State dental director, the Multnomah County (Portland) dental health office, and the chairman of the department of public health at the University of Oregon School of Dentistry. Public health physicians, a State health division engineer, an allergist, nutritionists, and an epidemiologist were also recruited. All members of the group had been active in previous fluoridation efforts. The group had worked in an unsuccessful campaign to have the State legislature pass a statewide fluoridation bill and had then organized to consider initiation of a referendum in Portland.

The fluoridationist group registered as a political committee with the Secretary of State, solicited funds, and commissioned a public opinion survey to determine the feasibility of a city referendum on the fluoridation of Portland. Although our ultimate goal was statewide fluoridation, our initial objective was to pursue the possibility of a fluoridation campaign in Portland. At the time of the survey, the Oregon Anti-Fluoridation Council was circulating petitions statewide to stop or prevent the addition of fluoride to community water supplies.

Our survey, in which a number of questions were asked about fluoridation, indicated that a majority of the voters in Portland (55 percent) were in favor of fluoridation. This outcome was not as favorable as some results reported in the literature (11). Moreover, our analysis suggested that arguments opposing fluoridation would be more persuasive to voters than arguments opposing it and also led us to believe that the initially positive voter strength could diminish greatly by election time. This situation paralleled one described by Mueller (3). Conducting a successful fluoridation campaign in Portland would have been expensive and probably would have led to voters confusing it with the statewide antifluoridation measure. Therefore, we directed our efforts solely at defeating that measure. Our concern was that weak supporters of fluoridation might be persuaded to cast votes against it. The point made by Mueller (3), that the side wanting change is at a decided disadvantage, was taken into consideration. Thus, we decided to abandon the campaign to fluoridate Portland's water supply and to work instead for the defeat of the statewide antifluoridation

measure. This strategy put the burden of extra effort to effect change on the opponents of fluoridation.

Statewide Antifluoridation Measure

Proponents of fluoridation attended the meetings which their opponents held to gain support for the antifluoridation measure that they hoped to get on the ballot in the 1976 State election. Fluoridationists also followed the accounts in the media of their opponents' efforts. The science director of the National Health Federation spoke frequently in Oregon, attracting large crowds and the attention of the media with such claims as "fluoride in the water at 1 ppm causes cancer." These assertions were refuted by a study of Hoover and associates (12), but the director gained wide public attention with them.

At the science director's speaking engagements, he encouraged the circulation of petitions for the statewide antifluoridation measure. The measure was designed to amend a 1973 statute relating to public water supplies, but the fact that this 1973 statute had been amended in 1975 was overlooked by the Oregon Anti-Fluoridation Council. The result of this oversight was to limit the effect of the proposed antifluoridation act to communities not served by city, municipal, or public water districts; thus, only about 10 percent of the State's population would have been affected by the measure. In addition, the revised statute would have inadvertently affected water quality, since pollution or contamination of water systems might no longer have been unlawful. The antifluoridationists' proposed measure was misworded and extremely confusing. We noticed our opponents' oversight in the fall of 1975, but decided not to pursue the point until we knew whether their proposal would achieve a place on the ballot.

Fluoridationists' Response

When the antifluoridation measure did get on the ballot, the following arguments were used against it:

1. Fluoridation has proved to be a safe, valuable, and economical public health measure.
2. Under the antifluoridation measure, there would be a loss of individual community options.
3. The measure would have potentially harmful effects on water quality.

The petitioners obtained barely enough signatures to have the antifluoridation proposal placed on the ballot, but their success surprised the proponents of fluoridation. The proponents of fluoridation conducted no systematic monitoring of the petitions filed, but they observed several instances of

verbal misrepresentation of the antifuoridation measure. Complaints about this misrepresentation were filed with the Secretary of State, but effective sanctions for such activity are not available in Oregon. The office of the Secretary of State indicated that a letter had been sent to the petitioners directing them to be more cautious, but we could not ascertain whether the communication had any significant effect on the antifuoridationists' efforts. It seems likely, however, that if we had made an organized attempt to challenge the opponents' petitions, a costly and time-consuming campaign might have been avoided.

In Oregon, a pamphlet containing an explanatory or "neutral" statement about each ballot measure, as well as paid advertisements favoring or opposing the measure, is mailed to each registered voter. Both the statements and the arguments may be challenged at a public hearing.

In 1976, the State fluoridation group hired an experienced campaign director to coordinate efforts and give full-time oversight. Although costly, this was essential, because none of the key persons responsible for organizing the fluoridation campaign could work full time to defeat the ballot measure. In the 1975 fluoridation effort, almost all of the active participants had been new to Oregon, and although they failed to get the fluoridation legislation passed that year, the experience they gained working together at that time was invaluable when the antifuoridation measure was placed on the State ballot in 1976.

By the time the antifuoridation measure was on the ballot, the State fluoridation group had been organized for almost 2 years. It set up four committees to conduct the campaign against the measure.

Media committee. As suggested by Gamson (8), we decided to conduct this campaign from a positive perspective. To educate the public, a central office was established to receive and give out any new information that became available and to respond to media questions as accurately as possible. We recognized that each television station would probably want discussions, or perhaps a debate, in which we would be forced to participate. While it had been decided that confrontations would be avoided, we recognized that some public debates through the media would probably be necessary. Therefore, a strategy for that contingency was planned, speakers were selected, and potential questions were reviewed, as Cohen suggests (1). In essence, however, we refused to debate unless refusal would be interpreted as a conspiracy to keep facts from the public.

Education committee. The education committee was responsible for a speakers bureau, literature handouts, and educational presentations to local groups such as Parent-Teacher Association and town hall meetings.

Advertising committee. The advertising committee made recommendations about expenditures for advertisements.

1976 Campaign Results

The campaign against the 1976 antifuoridation initiative was successful: the votes were 57 percent against the antifuoridation measure and 43 percent for it. That our campaign succeeded was primarily because we were able to hold the favorably inclined voters and to stress an error made by our opponents in citing the statutory reference in the title of the antifuoridation measure on the ballot. This error in the title created a technical flaw in the measure that would have resulted in the removal of some antipollution laws that were in effect. When we pointed this out, it attracted media attention, and questions were raised about potential health hazards if the measure were passed.

In our campaign we relied upon radio and newspaper advertisements, as well as 10-second television spots in the weekend before the election. In the two televised debates that were held, we avoided technical subjects and stressed the benefits of fluoridation.

Our educational work was not as far reaching as we would have liked, but it had some effect. Its involvement of a large number of community leaders was certainly an advantage. Every major health care group in Oregon endorsed our effort, thus giving credence to our position.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the campaign, however, was the coordination and organization that we achieved, since they prevented any serious mistakes. In contrast, our opponents committed two serious errors: one in drafting the ballot title and the other in not appearing at the hearing on statements that were to be published in the pamphlet for voters. Lack of testimony on the opponents' part contributed to the State Supreme Court's decision to uphold the elimination of the provocative claims they had made in statements submitted for inclusion in the voters pamphlet.

Recommendations

Clearly the controversy about fluoridation is far from over. Our mistaken impression that antifuoridation

efforts were diminishing, caught us off guard. We can expect that efforts will continue to be made to remove fluoride from public water supplies and to prohibit communities from adding fluoride to their water supplies.

To defeat such efforts, the following actions are recommended:

1. Communities should maintain a standby committee to educate the public about fluoridation and to respond to attempts to prohibit the fluoridation of water supplies. This committee needs to be broadly based and to include representatives of organized dentistry, public officials, and community leaders. It should be prepared organizationally so that it can become active whenever the need arises.

2. The standby committee needs to train speakers who can educate the community, for example, by participating in Parent-Teacher Association and town hall meetings and stressing the positive aspects of fluoridation.

3. The activities of the antifluoridation groups should not be ignored. Any attempts by the antifluoridationists at initiatives or referendums will have to be carefully scrutinized. Adequate methods for monitoring the opposition's collection of signatures should be devised well in advance of an election to insure that such collection complies with the law.

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SYNOPSIS

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Antifluoridationists have recently renewed their attempts to stop or prevent the fluoridation of community water supplies. In Oregon, for example, a measure that would have prohibited communities throughout the State from fluoridating their water supplies was placed on the ballot by petition in a 1976 State election. The proponents of fluoridation in the State, surprised by this success of their opponents, then mounted a campaign and the antifluoridation measure was defeated.

Factors contributing to this defeat were the smooth coordination and organization of the fluoridation proponents, which prevented serious mistakes on their part and permitted them to take advantage of their opponents' errors. These errors included (a) the citation of a 1973 statute (rather than an amended 1975 statute) in the title of the antifluoridation measure, (b) a technical flaw in the measure so that its passage would have resulted in the repeal of some antipollution laws and potential health hazards, and (c) the failure of the antifluoridationists to appear at a hearing on statements that were to be published in a pamphlet for voters.

As the recent antifluoridation activity in Oregon suggests, proponents of fluoridation need to be prepared at any time to meet the challenges posed by antifluoridationists. Such

preparation should include:

1. Careful monitoring of antifluoridation activities. An expensive campaign in support of fluoridation might be avoided by insuring that whenever attempts are made to place antifluoridation measures on the ballot, all pertinent rules and regulations are followed.

2. Maintenance of a standby committee to educate the public and respond to any attempts to pass antifluoridation legislation. Experience gained by working together on such a committee in advance of an election campaign can be invaluable.

3. Keeping a trained group of speakers ready to educate the community. An effective speakers bureau can stimulate interest in promoting fluoridation as well as help prevent antifluoridation measures from passing.