

Why the Fluoride Debate Misses the Point

By Mike Winther, President of IPS

This article addresses the issue of community water fluoridation, not from a medical or scientific standpoint, but from the perspective of individual rights and liberty. This commentary ignores the issues relating to the safety or efficacy of fluoride. I will leave the medical and scientific merits of the issue to those who are far more knowledgeable in those disciplines. What I intend to demonstrate in this article, however, is that forced fluoridation is wrong regardless of its health effects.

I suspect that many who may read this article don't have strong feelings about fluoridation one way or the other. Oh, they may have a slight preference, but to them it is not a matter of principle nor is the outcome of the debate perceived as a threat to anything they hold dear. This apathy exists only because both sides of the debate are missing the point. They have made this a medical debate when it should, first and foremost, be a rights issue. If we had a proper understanding of what is really at stake in this issue, few conscientious Americans could manage to maintain any degree of apathy.

This is not a debate about a water additive; it is a debate about the nature and extent of our rights. Our nation was founded in the absolute belief in a few fundamental principles. Paramount among these principles was the belief in God-given (or natural) rights. This concept of inalienable rights is the bedrock of our republic and is the very definition of liberty, since without this foundation there can be no liberty.

This view of liberty holds that people are free to live their life as they see fit so long as they don't violate the rights of others. It is this liberty for which millions have suffered and died both on the battlefield and in the martyr's fiery pyres.

From the infinite list of individual liberties possessed by every human, what could be more basic than the freedom to choose what we eat and drink? Yes, we are even free to choose unhealthy fare for our bodies. I will emphatically state that the preservation of this freedom is more important to a society than the public health. If maximizing the public health were to be the paramount objective for a society, it would be necessary to regulate every food and beverage that might be consumed. Certainly deep fried foods and high fat diets can be documented to be responsible for millions of premature deaths every year. A society willing to exchange individual liberty for health could use the power of government to ban all unhealthy foods and beverages. Is this the way of life that we wish to endorse? Is this the legacy we want to leave to our children?

Can any government legitimately take away these basic rights? If we concede that it is permissible for government to violate even one right, then all rights come tumbling down like a house of cards.

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To concede that government can legitimately violate even one of these rights is to concede that some other right could also be removed. Every individual right that government removes, paves the way for a future violation.

Some have argued that this attempt to legislate what we drink and to force chemicals into our water is nothing new. “After all”, they argue, “we insert vitamins A & D into our milk.” The question is not whether we have supplements added to our milk; rather it is whether we use the force of government to mandate this practice. If producers add the supplements voluntarily, then there is no violation of the producer’s rights and liberties; consumers are free to purchase or ignore the product—therefore there is no violation of the consumer’s rights and liberties either. But if the government requires the addition of vitamins to milk, the rights of both producers and consumers are violated. I find it interesting, however, that the very people who scoff at the possibility that mandatory fluoridation could lead to the loss of other liberties are the first to use earlier losses of liberty to justify fluoridation. The truth of the matter is that one violation does lead to others and their own logic proves it. Each additional intrusion by government accelerates the loss of liberty.

Nowhere is this principle better demonstrated than in the life of Martin Niemoller.

He was a pastor in Germany during the rise of Hitler. A supporter of Hitler at first, he later saw the danger in Hitler’s message and actions. Niemoller finally spoke out against the Nazi government, but perhaps too late. He was twice arrested for treason and finally imprisoned in the Dachau and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. Niemoller is famous for this observation which was made in 1945:

First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me.

Who should be most worried about forced fluoridation? It should be the churches, of all faiths, that wish to preserve the freedom of worship; it should be the media who want to preserve the right to a free press; it should be the civil libertarians who want to preserve the protection from unreasonable search and seizure; and it should be every citizen that wants to decide for themselves what food supplements and medicines to swallow. In short, it should be every thinking citizen in our land!

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Numerous people have asked me, *“If the majority of our citizens want to fluoridate the water, are we not obligated to do it?”*

Somehow we have come to accept the mistaken notion that any policy is acceptable if approved by a majority of the citizens. This is patently false. Do we want to live in a society where the majority can take away the rights of a minority? I sure hope not. If we can force fluoride into the water today, what will it be tomorrow?

Forgive my boldness, but I must chide the well-meaning dentists and public health activists who have lost sight of the necessity of freedom of choice; the absolute standard of individual liberty; and the very foundation of our great nation. They myopically attempt to save a few teeth by sacrificing the foundation of our free society.

Martin Niemoller might put it this way:

“They came to force fluoride into our water and I said nothing because I was not a dentist....”

“If we can force fluoride into the water today, what will it be tomorrow?”

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