2.5 km pipeline carrying unfluoridated water from the Cobram water treatment plant to the Murray Goulburn dairy processing plant. The Co-operative agreed to make a contribution to the funding, and the project was expected to be completed in 2016.

The cost of living in a small community

This was a win-win situation for Cobram and the Co-operative, with most of the funding coming from the government.

But is it such a win? Cobram, and in particular its children, will have missed out for 7 years on fluoridated water. For the community at large, the Cobram imbroglio barely raised a policy ripple. Small communities of less than 1000 may miss out on fluoridation altogether because it is not regarded as cost-effective. However, these dismissed populations add up to 2 million people nationwide.

The question, then, becomes one of assessing the effectiveness of advocacy when any proposed change is confronted by the fear, real or otherwise, of losing jobs. However, when advocacy becomes ineffective, change has to be achieved by subtler nagging of government, because there is virtually no sensible person who would disagree about the benefits of fluoride.

Have we lost the plot?

It is all about cost; especially, as with all public health and commercial considerations, there is a further twist — in this case, the increase in the consumption of bottled water, almost all of which is suboptimally fluoridated. Bottled water is permitted to have the same level of fluoride recommended for drinking water — 0.6–1.1 mg of fluoride per litre. Since its introduction in the 1980s, bottled water has grown into a $500 million a year industry in Australia and has become the main source of drinking water in one in 10 households. However, as the chair of the Australian Dental Association's Oral Health Committee said, "people who prefer bottled water … risk putting their dental health back to the 1960s, when tooth decay was widespread because there was no fluoride in the water".

The rise in bottled water production without any serious move by the multinational manufacturers towards fluoridation is presumably one of those awkward commercial-in-confidence matters. Without concerted nagging of the policymakers, such as occurred in Cobram, nothing happens.

In fact, fluoridation in Australia has gone backwards. In Queensland, where once it was obligatory, legislation has made it a voluntary responsibility. Many local governments have subjugated public health to the commercial imperative of it being "too costly", despite evidence to the contrary.

Fluoridation policy is in danger of degenerating into public health anarchy where commercial interests can shelter behind the mantra of freedom of choice with its rehearsed arguments of blind libertarianism, no matter how obvious the public good. Presumably none of these libertarians would want to advocate freedom of choice about a clean water supply.

Ignoring the bleeding obvious should not be allowed to make the community bleed the cost of appalling teeth, especially when there are continual complaints about how disadvantaged rural areas are with regard to dental health.

At least, the Cobram community will eventually know better times in dental health; but now, what about the fluoridation of bottled water?

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References are available online at www.mja.com.au.

Poem

Coming of age

"You are old when you’re born", he* said.
So much living and dying during those nine months:
clefts, gills and neural ridges thrown up, filled in, torn down — a time-lapse drama of evolution played out on the foetal ocean floor.

Your cells by nine months are wearied by wars have forged truces with alien forces built machines underwater visited palaces drawn from fine tissue played parts in evolutionary dramas relaxed briefly on now sunken islands.

By birth your genes have had their day your destiny set. I’ve heard earnest clerics say we should be born again. Terrible penance surely to go through that once more.

*Stephen Simpson, academic director of the Charles Perkins Centre, University of Sydney

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