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**Deputy Premier of Western Australia  
Minister for Health; Training and Workforce Development**

Our Ref: 25-42801  
Your Ref: Petition No 55

Hon Simon O'Brien MLC  
Chairman  
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Mr O'Brien

Thank you for your letter of 16 October 2014 seeking comment on the terms of Petition No 55 – Water Fluoridation WA and the submission from the principal petitioner.

I am pleased to provide the following comments, firstly with some general remarks about community water fluoridation in Western Australia (WA) and the role of the statutory Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Advisory Committee, then responding to the specific matters raised by the principal petitioner.

**Merits of community water fluoridation**

The State Government supports fluoridation of community water supplies as an effective part of WA's oral health strategy.

Fluoridation of community water supplies forms part of a suite of caries prevention measures that include healthy diet, good oral hygiene, appropriate use of fluoridated toothpaste and regular dental checks. It benefits all sectors of the community, regardless of age, individual motivation, socioeconomic status or the availability of dental care. Community water fluoridation especially benefits children.

Due to directives issued by successive Ministers for Health since 1967, some 91 percent of the Western Australian population receive the benefits of fluoridated drinking water, principally via the integrated water supply system, which supplies the Perth metropolitan area, as well as wheat-belt and southern regional communities and communities out to Kalgoorlie, Geraldton, Albany and many other communities in regional WA, without any detrimental effects.

Fluoridation of community water supplies is in line with all sound principles of science and public health policy. Fluoridation of drinking water is supported by an extensive range of authoritative health research agencies and government bodies in Australia and worldwide, including:

- all State and Territory Government health agencies in Australia
- National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia) (NHMRC)
- Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health (ARCPOH)
- Australian Dental Association
- World Health Organisation (WHO)
- International Association for Dental Research
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USA)
- Australian Medical Association
- Australian and New Zealand Society for Paediatric Dentistry
- the Australasian Academy of Paediatric Dentistry
- the Australian Academy of Science
- Australian Centre for Human Health Risk Assessment
- Public Health Association of Australia
- Osteoporosis Australia
- Arthritis Australia
- Diabetes Australia
- Alzheimer's Australia
- Cancer Council Victoria
- Asthma Foundation of Victoria
- Royal Children's Hospital Department of Dentistry (Melbourne)
- the Dental School at The University of Melbourne
- La Trobe University School of Dentistry and Oral Health
- Deakin University Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences
- Harvard University Medical School, Harvard School of Dental Medicine and the Harvard University School of Public Health

In relation to the science underpinning fluoridation, there is an impressive collective body of research supporting fluoridation of drinking water.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australia's peak health body, reviewed water fluoridation in Australia in 2007. That review affirms that water fluoridation remains the most effective and socially equitable means of achieving community wide exposure to the caries prevention effects of fluoride.

The NHMRC remains the appropriate body to conduct any review of water fluoridation in Australia. The NHMRC is currently conducting an update of its review of the science behind fluoridation, to evaluate all relevant research published since 2006. It is nevertheless important to make the point that no epidemiological data or peer reviewed scientific paper published in a recognised scientific journal has drawn a link between adverse health effects and fluoridation of drinking water, nor does any reputable science or public health body oppose community water fluoridation.

In WA, fluoridation of drinking water is based on optimal fluoride levels recommended by the NHMRC, with maximum fluoride levels, having considered relevant factors from all sources, not exceeding 1 milligram per litre established by law.

I am assured that drinking water fluoridated at optimal levels does not pose a health risk. Claims that cast doubt on the safety or cost-effectiveness of fluoridation of drinking water, of the type that appear to surface on a number of internet web sites or blogs, have been comprehensively examined by the NHMRC in Australia and other bodies, such as the World Health Organisation, and have consistently been found to be without foundation.

Water fluoridation is crucial in caries protection for those individuals who for reasons that may be social, economic or medical cannot brush their teeth regularly with fluoride toothpaste, a position that any vulnerable individual may encounter during their life time.

Fluoridation of public drinking water supplies has demonstrated a benefit to all Western Australians and also to the approximately 90 per cent of all Australians who enjoy the dental health benefits of this important public health initiative.

**In summary, important dental benefits are obtained for a community from fluoridation of its water supplies, but only poorer oral health outcomes result from denying this public health measure on account of the opposing views of a small number of individuals.**

### **Role of the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Advisory Committee**

Detail about the role and function of the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Advisory Committee (the Fluoridation Committee) is provided in the attachment to this letter. In summary, the role of the Fluoridation Committee is to consider, advise and make written recommendations to the Minister for Health relating to fluoridation of drinking water supplies and the achievement of the objects and effectual administration of the *Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Act 1966* (the Act).

### **Petition 55 – Water Fluoridation WA**

The principal petitioner, the President of Fluoride Free WA, has been a prolific correspondent over a number of years, variously to my office, other WA Parliamentarians, the Department of Health, the Fluoridation Committee, and an open letter to Parliament itself, in airing his views, and that of his organisation, Fluoride Free WA, in opposition to community water fluoridation in WA.

In particular, the Fluoridation Committee appears to have been the target of his group's interest, having received some 90 documents from him for consideration over a two year period. The Committee has, in good faith, on three separate occasions from 2013 to July 2014, provided the petitioner and his followers with comprehensive and detailed written responses addressing their series of objections to various aspects of water fluoridation, with considerable lists of cited references.

Further, the principal petitioner did not appear to disclose in his submission to your Committee that the Fluoridation Committee's "one response" in fact consisted of over 45 pages of detailed argument on those three separate occasions. Copies of these responses are attached to this letter. I commend these responses to your Committee for consideration, as they provide considerably more detail in response to, and refuting, all the matters that were raised in the principal petitioner's submission to your Committee.

It should be noted that this body of detailed information represents not merely my opinion or the opinion of the Fluoridation Committee, but represents in part the effective current consensus of the scientific community worldwide on the safety and efficacy of community water fluoridation.

This detailed information was provided in good faith to the principal petitioner considerably prior to his petition being tabled in the Legislative Council in September 2014. It is disappointing to note that there does not appear to be any evidence that the principal petitioner acknowledges the existence of, or understands, this body of evidence and citations that are contrary to his pre-existing views.

In summary, and despite claims that a large body of science supports the principal petitioner's views, I am advised that the "evidence" that was submitted to the Fluoridation Committee, and referred to in the petitioner's submission, was a mixture of documents of poor or unsubstantiated quality, and some reliable documents, none of which support the principal petitioner's views against water fluoridation but all of which appear to have been interpreted or claimed as supporting those views.

**Put simply, and in summary, there is no credible evidence that invalidates the safety or efficacy of community water fluoridation.**

The statements made by the principal petitioner in his submission may fairly be regarded as his own opinion and those of his organisation, but no more than that. I have noted that the views expressed in this petition appear to be derived from the principal petitioner's specific role as President of Fluoride Free WA, a body that, on its web site, publicly states that "*It is our intention to bring about the removal of fluoride from WA's water supply through a combination of targeted campaigning and a raising of awareness of the situation amongst WA's population*"<sup>1</sup>.

This aim is reinforced by this organisation's Objects of Association<sup>2</sup>, which include:

- *To halt the practice of water fluoridation in Western Australia*
- *To have all legislation enabling the fluoridation of public water supplies in Western Australia repealed.*

My role as Minister for Health is to ensure the proper function of public health policy in WA and, thus, the wellbeing of the WA community. The signatories to this petition are of course entitled to their views, and I respect and support their right to express their views to the Parliament, but that does not make those views a sound basis for public health policy.

<sup>1</sup> From: [www.meetup.com/Fluoride-Free-WA/about/](http://www.meetup.com/Fluoride-Free-WA/about/)

<sup>2</sup> From: [www.fluoridefreewa.org/files.php](http://www.fluoridefreewa.org/files.php)

**I can confirm to your Committee that, in the clear absence of any public health evidence supporting the opinion of Fluoride Free WA, or the principal petitioner, it is reasonable to regard those views as incompatible with the public interest and incompatible with the proper function of public health policy in WA. There are simply no sound public policy grounds or public health grounds for acceding to the request of the petitioners to cease water fluoridation in WA or to repeal the Act.**

This position has previously been made clear to the principal petitioner in correspondence from myself and from the Premier of WA in 2012, copies of which are also attached to this correspondence.

In particular, I find the principal petitioner's statement in his submission that "*all members of the Committee have a vested interest in the continuation of the water fluoridation programme*" quite offensive and uninformed.

The interest of all members of the Fluoridation Committee, including its current Chairman, the fifth Chairman in the Committee's history, is in achieving the objects and effectual administration of the Act, and in the good governance of the State within the scope provided by the Act. This is an interest shared by myself, the Premier and the State Government generally.

### **Closing remarks**

In closing, I would also draw to your attention that the principal petitioner, on his web site, has recently made some remarks responding to his obtaining redacted minutes of a recent Fluoridation Committee meeting, in which he stated that: <sup>3</sup>:

*"On the plus side all the correspondence that they are receiving from Fluoride Free WA is at least tying them down in paperwork."*

Given that the principal petitioner appears to have boasted to his followers about "*tying [statutory committees] down in paperwork*", you may wish to consider this perspective when assessing the amount of time and resources your Committee applies to this matter.

I also bring to your Committee's attention the following paper, which demolishes tactics employed by those attempting to denigrate this sound public health policy:

- "*When public action undermines public health: a critical examination of antifuoridationist literature*" (Armfield, Australia and New Zealand Health Policy, 2007; available from: [www.anzhealthpolicy.com/content/4/1/25](http://www.anzhealthpolicy.com/content/4/1/25))

Please also find enclosed for your reference relevant correspondence from the Chair of the Fluoridation Committee to the petitioner, as President of Fluoride Free WA, dated 20 December 2013 and 30 July 2014, and to the Vice President of Fluoride Free WA, dated 12 February 2014, which is relevant to a number of matters raised in the petition. I have also enclosed copies of correspondence from myself and the Premier to the petitioner in 2012 and background reference material about the Fluoridation Committee.

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<sup>3</sup> From: [www.meetup.com/Fluoride-Free-WA/messages/boards/thread/47428542/](http://www.meetup.com/Fluoride-Free-WA/messages/boards/thread/47428542/) message on 27 Sep 2014

**I wish to conclude by reiterating that drinking water fluoridated at optimal levels results in important dental benefits for the WA community and simply does not pose a health risk.**

I trust that the information provided is of assistance to your deliberations. If your Committee would like more information on any particular aspect of this matter, the Department of Health stands ready to assist, and can provide the necessary information.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Kim Hames MLA  
DEPUTY PREMIER  
MINISTER FOR HEALTH**

**21 NOV 2014**

Att:

- Role of the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Advisory Committee (attachment)
- Correspondence from the Premier to the principal petitioner, dated 28 March 2012.
- Correspondence from the Minister for Health to the principal petitioner, dated 16 July 2012 and
- Correspondence from the Chair of the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Advisory Committee to the President of Fluoride Free WA (the principal petitioner), dated 20 December 2013 and 30 July 2014.
- Correspondence from the Chair of the Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies Advisory Committee to the Vice President of Fluoride Free WA, dated 12 February 2014.
- *"When public action undermines public health: a critical examination of antifuoridationist literature"* (Armfield, Australia and New Zealand Health Policy, 2007).