

Talking Ethics



Public Health Ethics: The Case of Community Water Fluoridation

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Dental hygienists play a vital role in protecting and promoting the health of individuals, communities, and populations. As regulated health professionals practising in variety of settings, dental hygienists encounter ethical challenges when faced with situations requiring a balance of opposing values, beliefs, and obligations.

Those working in public health (PH) may face unique challenges that one would not encounter as frequently in individualized clinical care settings. The concept of PH ethics emphasizes the health and well-being of populations rather than individuals, with a focus on collective responsibilities and common good (Table 1). Public health strives to achieve community health in a way that respects the rights of individuals, but tension between the good of the community and individual autonomy often arises. This tension cannot be resolved by a single ethical principle. As a result, professionals may need to look to ethical tools, frameworks, and theories for additional insight.

THE CASE OF COMMUNITY WATER FLUORIDATION

While many Canadians enjoy the benefits of good oral health, dental decay is still a significant problem for marginalized populations. Prevention is the foundation of dental hygiene practice, yet the complex and multifactorial etiology of dental caries cannot be addressed with one specific preventive measure or policy approach. A combination of complementary interventions and policies is required.

There is overwhelming consensus from leading international health professionals and agencies that community water fluoridation (CWF) is an important, safe, and effective way to reduce the prevalence of dental caries. Yet, despite its effectiveness, CWF is still opposed by many. The tension between competing ethical principles and values is clear: CWF sets individual rights against the common good of the community. Opponents of CWF argue that it is an infringement on personal freedom; however, some infringement upon personal freedom may be justified when the well-being of a population is at stake. There are no simple rules for balancing principles when they conflict with one another, but there are now numerous frameworks to guide decision making. Figure 1 is an example of one such framework.

Table 1. Comparison of medical ethics and public health ethics

MEDICAL ETHICS	PUBLIC HEALTH ETHICS
Individual/client focus	Population and community focus
Individual agency and responsibility	Social determinants
Individual decision making	Systems of practice
Client care	Distribution of resources
Client seeks out clinician	PH practitioner seeks out clients
Client may reject advice	May be difficult for individuals to opt out
Deeply rooted in values of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence	Wider range of values that are more explicit (social justice, protection of collective interests, reciprocity, etc.)

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>>>> Talking Ethics

*Public Health Ethics: The Case of Community Water Fluoridation...cont'd***Figure 1.** A six-step ethics framework for CWF*

- 1 What are the public health goals of the proposed program?**
To promote and protect the health of communities by reducing the prevalence of dental caries and oral health inequities.
- 2 How effective is the program in achieving its stated goals?**
Seventy years of research demonstrates that CWF is a safe and effective way of reducing caries.
- 3 What are the known or potential burdens of the program?**
CWF interferes with individual autonomy. Adding fluoride to public water sources is an expenditure for municipalities.
- 4 Can burdens be minimized? Are there alternative approaches?**
Greater weight should be applied to the common good rather than individual autonomy. To prevent dental caries, there is no individual approach that is completely effective on its own; it requires a combination of interventions. CWF plays a critical and complementary role in caries prevention. CWF reduces dental treatment costs. Numerous municipalities are spending a considerable amount of resources responding to public inquiries on this issue, so governments should explore provincial regulation.
- 5 Is the program implemented fairly?**
Water fluoridation is an effective public health measure that reduces inequities in health. It reaches community residents, regardless of socioeconomic status, education, income or race/ethnicity.
- 6 How can the benefits and burdens of a program be fairly balanced?**
An increase in the number of communities with fluoridated water means that more Canadians will benefit from improved oral health. The dental treatment costs saved from CWF can be reinvested in public health interventions.

*Source: Kass NE. An ethics framework for public health. *Am J Public Health.* 2001;91(11):1776-82.

Reducing oral health inequities should be central to dental hygiene care. PH initiatives, such as CWF, which help to improve oral health for all can be ethically justified. Given the evidence demonstrating that CWF reduces caries, and given that socially disadvantaged children suffering the highest levels of decay may benefit the most, there is an ethical imperative to take action.

The issue of CWF in Canada is complex but, by using the resources available to you and by applying a dental hygiene critical perspective, dental hygienists can contribute to, protect, and promote the oral and overall health of Canadians. Use CDHA's resource to show that you care about the health of your community by supporting community water fluoridation. http://files.cdha.ca/profession/Support_Community_Water_Fluoridation_2017.pdf.

