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DHB view on fluoride

Putting water fluoridation decisions in the hands of health boards won't be a straight-forward process, a senior Hamilton politician has warned.

Dave Macpherson, a city councillor and Waikato DHB member, said the board would invariably waste a huge amount of time if DHBs, rather than the Health Ministry, are saddled with the responsibility.

Board members debated the Waikato DHB's submission on the Health (Fluoridation of Drinking Water) Bill recently.

The bill proposes transferring decision-making powers for fluoridating water supplies away from councils to DHBs. The Waikato DHB's submission endorses the shift but said the board would "more strongly support it if decision-making was retained at a national level."

Board member Clyde Wade wasn't sure what workload pressures the change would put on DHBs, in terms of consultation, but didn't want the issue to become all-consuming.

"We've got far bigger fish to fry," Wade said. "We don't want this fluoride tail wagging the DHB dog."

In reply, Macpherson said board members were dreaming if they anticipated treating the fluoride issue as a minor matter.

"If the DHB is landed with that decision-making power, this board will be, I'd say, wasting a huge amount of time on that issue whether we like it or not. And that's a very important tactical reason to shunt it to the Government."

The Hamilton City Council recommenced fluoridating Hamilton's water in early 2014, following a referendum in which 66.09 per cent of voters supported a return to fluoridation. The council has since agreed to provide fluoride-free water at two sites in the city – Taitua Arboretum and Claudelands Park.

Board member and Hamilton deputy mayor Martin Gallagher said a decision about whether to continue fluoridating the city's water was largely a tick-box exercise due to the previous referendum on the issue.

"If we think that the Government, through the director general, should just make the decision, so it sits in Wellington ... then we should be very clear [in our views]," Gallagher said.

Board chairman Bob Simcock said it was the consensus of the board that the decision-making sit with the Health Ministry. If the power was vested to DHBs then there should be a clear national framework put around the decision-making process.

"This DHB through me has been the most aggressive on this [fluoridation] issue, probably in the country, to the degree of pissing the Minister off," Simcock said.

The Waikato DHB's area encompasses 10 local authorities and 70 independent water supply networks.

In its submission, the Waikato DHB said lobbying and pressure had confused the debate around water fluoridation and muddled the overwhelming scientific evidence supporting its use.

Last year, newly-elected Hamilton city councillor Siggie Henry spoke out about the fluoridation of the city's water and urged elected members and health board members to take up the antifluoride cause.

Waikato DHB Medical Officer of Health Felicity Dumble said the bill was a step in the right direction because it treated water fluoridation as an oral health initiative.

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