After 30 Years, Fight on Fluoride in Water Goes on in Brainerd, MN

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This 1984 Today show story recounts Brainerd, Minnesota's 30-year battle against state-mandated fluoridation of the municipal water supply. Opponents claim the added fluoride is a by-product of the aluminum industry, and is linked to cancer.

Keywords

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"After 30 Years, Fight on Fluoride in Water Goes on in Brainerd, MN." Boyd Matson, correspondent. 


**Transcript**

After 30 Years, Fight on Fluoride in Water Goes on in Brainerd, MN

JANE PAULEY, anchor:

On Cross Country this morning, Boyd Matson takes us up to central Minnesota to the town of, that’s known as Brainerd. It is the home of the mythological lumberjack Paul Bunyan. And as Boyd reports it’s also the last stand in the fight over fluoridation.

BOYD MATSON reporting:

Good morning from Brainerd, Minnesota. There’s a controversy going on in this small community that has been raging for over 30 years. It’s over an issue you might have thought was rather clear: fluoride in city water. Many of the residents here still believe that fluoridated water is bad for their lawns and for their bodies.

IRENE JOHNSON, Fluoridation Opponent: There is a link, a definite link, between fluoride and cancer. MATSON: There are, of course, others in this town who believe fluoride is good, or at least good for the smiles of their children. It fights tooth decay.

Doctor JACK ECHTERNACT: You cannot believe the beauty of the teeth of these children that have consumed fluoridated water. They’re just like pearls. Not a blemish on them.

MATSON: The debate is not new, but you have forgotten the fluoride fights of the 50’s. Back then it was a National issue and many believed forced fluoride in their city water would dilute the U.S. Constitution. You may have forgotten those arguments, but Brainerd, Minnesota hasn’t.

JOHNSON: I don’t think it’s right for the State telling us what to do. I think that’s just entirely wrong. I think when you have this you have a police state, which I think we have here.

MATSON: Irene Johnson is one reason this fight’s lasted so long. She refuses to give up, but her chief opponent is also a tough fighter. He’s Dr. Jack Echternact, a local dentist.

ECHTERNACT: I think that children have a right to have water that has the fluoride in the optimum
amount to prevent their decay. They don’t have a vote.
JOHNSON: Let’s have some more unfluoridated coffee.
UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Ah ok that’s good. I’ll even drink that.
MATSON: To some in Brainerd fluoride is still a plot, only the Communists have been replaced by industries trying to unload toxic waste.
When fluoride is put in municipal water, it is not pharmaceutical grade fluoride. It’s a waste product of industry. It’s industrial grade fluoride.
JOHNSON: The aluminum company has to find a way to dispose of their waste products and make money and this is the way to do it: put it in everybody’s water.
MATSON: We checked and yes, hydrofluorosilicic acid, used to fluoridate many water systems is a hazardous waste, a byproduct of fertilizer manufacturing. It’s added to the water at the rate of one part per million. However, in many towns, fluoride occurs naturally in much larger quantities.
The American Dental Association claims that after 30 years of fluoride additives in this country’s water, cavities have been reduced by as much as 60 percent.
Now for what may be a surprise: despite the cavity reports, several major cities, including Los Angeles, don’t add fluoride. In fact on 59 percent of Americans fluoridated water.
So why the endless debate in Brainerd? Why don’t they just decide what they want and do it? Well, they have no say. Minnesota state law ordered Brainerd to fluoridate, to add fluoride to the water, a water the city considered pure.
Brainerd City Council President MILDRED MICHAELIS: Our water is so pure, we don’t have to add chlorine to it. And the state has forced us to put fluoride in it and people really object to this.
MATSON: And they object with excessive determination: three decades worth. In 1954 while Dien Bien Phu was falling to the Communists, the first petition against fluoridation in Brainerd was being circulated. In 1964 when the Warren Commission was issuing its report on the Kennedy assassination, people in Brainerd were defeating another fluoride proposition 2 – 1.
In 1974 when President Nixon was resigning, Brainerd was defeating a fluoride proposition 10 – 1.
And in 1984 while the Democrats were trying to pick a candidate, Brainerd was being told by the state Health Department they had no choice: they had to continue adding fluoride to their water.
We don’t know what the nation will be talking about in 1994, but we have a good idea what they’ll be talking about in Brainerd.
JOHNSON: I think it’s about time we slap a suit on the State myself. Don’t you think we could? Don’t you think we have grounds to do this?