



16 JUN 2017

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**The Hon Roger Cook MLA
Deputy Premier
Minister for Health; Mental Health**

Our Ref: 60-01361

Ms Louise Gee
Acting Chief Executive Officer
Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley
PO Box 614
KUNUNURRA WA 6743

Dear Ms Gee

Thank you for your letter of 3 May 2017 regarding the introduction of fluoridation to the Kununurra community water supply. I thank you for your Shire's interest in the important public health issue of oral health for children and adults in Kununurra.

As the Western Australian Minister for Health, I would like to take this opportunity to set out some key background information for you about community water fluoridation, before turning to the specific matters relating to your letter.

The McGowan Government supports fluoridation of community water supplies as an effective part of Western Australia's (WA) oral health strategy. The benefits and safety of fluoridation is supported by overwhelming scientific evidence and is supported both in the *WA State Oral Health Plan 2016-2020*¹ and the Commonwealth Government's National Oral Health Plan.

Fluoridation of community water supplies is an effective way to deliver fluoride to all members of the community, regardless of age, individual motivation, socioeconomic status or the availability of dental care. It forms part of a suite of caries prevention initiatives that also relate to healthy diet, good oral hygiene, appropriate use of fluoridated toothpaste and regular dental checks.

Recently, the Western Australian Department of Health (DOH) published a WA study, entitled "*Dental Health Outcomes of Children Residing in Fluoridated and Non-Fluoridated Areas of Western Australia*", clearly showing that children from unfluoridated areas of WA are at 50-60 per cent greater risk of having tooth decay, compared with children drinking fluoridated water².

¹ Details at: <http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Reports-and-publications/State-Oral-Health-Plan>

² Details at: ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Reports-and-publications/Dental-Health-Outcomes-of-Children-in-WA
13th Floor, Dumas House, 2 Havelock Street, WEST PERTH WA 6005

A new National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) study, also released recently, rules out safety concerns³, echoing the results of numerous other studies around the world that have, repeatedly, also found fluoridation of drinking water to be safe.

In the case of Kununurra, fluoridation simply involves adjusting the fluoride level in the water supply from around 0.4 milligrams per litre, the long term historic level, to an optimal level of around 0.6 milligrams per litre. This aligns Kununurra with other regional communities in the Kimberley, such as Broome and Derby, as well as Halls Creek, whose ground water supply contains, and has for many decades, fluoride at around 0.6 milligrams per litre. Across the border, drinking water supplies for Darwin and Katherine have been fluoridated at around 0.8 milligrams per litre since 1972, again without any detriment or concern. These levels all remain well within the health-related guideline value of 1.5 milligrams per litre for fluoride that is set out in the *"Australian Drinking Water Guidelines"*, also published by the NHMRC.

In relation to your query about feedback from the Kununurra community, I am aware that there is a level of community opposition to the move in Kununurra, as expressed in the petition, and I acknowledge the petitioners views on this matter. However, while community surveys are important to inform public health decisions and to provide a social context to those decisions, the overriding driver for public health decisions always remains the protection of the health of the community as a whole.

It does, however, highlight the need for comprehensive information about the benefits of water fluoridation to be available for Kununurra residents, to allow community members to access reliable and accurate information on water fluoridation, understand the implications of fluoridation, and have an opportunity to raise any concerns they may have. The DOH had already commenced this process in 2015 and 2016 and will be able to provide further information for your community just prior to the commencement of fluoridation in December 2017.

Ultimately, it is not possible to design a community information strategy that will satisfy those opposed to fluoridation, or to ensure that every individual community member supports such initiatives. A balance must thus be struck between accommodating the views of individuals and protection of public health.

I am satisfied that the DOH has achieved this balance with respect to the recent moves to extend the benefits of fluoridation within WA and is aware of the cross section of views on this subject from individuals in the Kununurra community.

I am also satisfied that extension of water fluoridation to Kununurra will provide significant improvements to the oral health outcomes in this community, life-long reduction in incidence of dental caries and reduction in future demand for dental surgical facilities. I encourage all parties to view water fluoridation as a significant positive step for Kununurra and a key step to providing the best possible health outcomes for your community, particularly for children.

³ Details at: www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-topics/health-effects-water-fluoridation

I trust the information provided will assist you in answering queries from your residents.

The DOH has committed to keeping your Shire informed of the next community information session later in 2017. For further information about community water fluoridation in the meantime, residents may wish to send an e-mail query to the DOH at: ehinfo@health.wa.gov.au or, peruse fluoridation information on the DOH website at: http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/F_I/Fluoridation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Roger Cook', with a stylized flourish at the end.

HON ROGER COOK MLA
DEPUTY PREMIER
MINISTER FOR HEALTH; MENTAL HEALTH

12 JUN 2017