

Transcript: Legislative Council Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration

Wednesday 1st December 2009

**Public Hearing examination
Department of Health's Assessment Report
January 2009 Heatwaves in Victoria**

Mr KAVANAGH — Thank you, Chair, before asking the witnesses a question I would appreciate your guidance on a matter. On behalf of the people of western Victoria, I would like to ask you about the appropriateness of asking Dr Carnie about fluoride.

The CHAIR — As it relates to a heatwave event?

Mr KAVANAGH — No.

The CHAIR — The two witnesses were invited today specifically in relation to the response to heatwave. I do not know if Dr Carnie is in a position to answer — it is probably not fair to put him on the spot by asking him to answer a question about a matter he was not necessarily expecting. Dr Carnie, I do not know if — —

Mr DAVIS — You could do an inquiry on health generally and the annual report.

Dr CARNIE — I am happy to answer a question on fluoride.

The CHAIR — Okay, Mr Kavanagh, if you have only one question on this fluoride issue?

Mr BARBER — You get to play your joker on this one.

Mr KAVANAGH — Actually I have several questions.

The CHAIR — We are here on the heatwave response matter. But Dr Carnie has agreed to take your question.

Mr KAVANAGH — I ask you, Dr Carnie, on the subject of fluoridation of water supplies, that although there is evidence of benefit, there is also scientific evidence of detrimental effects of adding fluoride to water supplies, aren't there?

Dr CARNIE — The only scientific evidence that exists in terms of a theoretical deleterious effect is on dental fluorosis, and this happens at relatively high levels of fluoride in the water. This certainly is a feature in some countries in which the natural fluoride levels are in the range over 2 parts per million, sometimes 4 or higher.

But at the level of fluoride that is used in water supplies in Australia, which is generally around 1 part per million, we know that dental fluorosis if it occurs is of minimal nature and usually only a cosmetic issue. Generally it cannot be picked up by the public, it is only a trained person who can pick up dental fluorosis at that sort of level. There is no other scientific evidence of any other deleterious effects of fluoride at the levels used in public fluoridation programs in Australia.

Mr KAVANAGH — So you do not accept any evidence of brittle bones, osteosarcoma rates, or even — —

Dr CARNIE — No, we do not. There is no scientific evidence on that. The osteosarcoma story began with a study from Harvard where a partial study was reported on prematurely by one of the researchers, trying to show that there was a slightly increased rate of osteosarcoma in boys rather than girls. The full results of that study have never been published, and in fact there was a letter from the leading person in that study who said that it was quite premature to come to any conclusions based on those preliminary results.

We have in fact looked at osteosarcoma rates in Victoria versus Queensland over the past 25 years. As you know, Queensland has not had fluoride in its water until this year. There was absolutely no difference in bone cancer rates between Victoria and Queensland over the past 25 years.

Mr KAVANAGH — Wouldn't you then say that your answer is that you reject the evidence that is there as weak, rather than there is no evidence?

Dr CARNIE — There is no accepted scientific evidence. The National Health and Medical Research Council undertook a systematic review, and that review included the issue of cancer, and the conclusion was that fluoridation of water supplies is safe and effective. The fluoridation of water supplies is also supported by the Cancer Council of Victoria, which they would not be doing if there happened to be some relationship with bone cancer.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your indulgence on this matter, Dr Carnie.

Mr KAVANAGH — You are asking me not to ask any more questions?

The CHAIR — It is not within the terms of reference, Mr Kavanagh.

Mr KAVANAGH — I am happy to be guided by your advice, Chair."