

Ashburton fluoride bid fails

John Keast Ashburton

An attempt to have fluoride put back in Ashburton's water supply has failed in a binding referendum.

Preliminary results from the Ashburton District Council referendum showed almost 55 per cent of voters, or 4068 people, voted against putting fluoride back in the town supply, while 3343 residents voted for it.

Sixty-four per cent of eligible voters turned out for the referendum.

Mayor Bede O'Malley was disappointed by the result.

"I am a supporter but a 55 to 45 result is quite a clear indication of the way the people feel."

He said he was disappointed with the turnout. "Given the significance either way of the topic, I would have liked to see at least 80%."

Anti-fluoride campaigner Don Church said the vote was decisive and should end debate in Ashburton. He warned that if health officials tried to get fluoride into the Christchurch supply, he would continue his fight there.

Canterbury District Health Board School and Community Dental Service clinical director Martin Lee said the result was disappointing as Ashburton needed its water fluoridated to protect residents' teeth.

The lack of fluoride in Canterbury water supplies was a key reason for Canterbury's poor standing in oral health.

Lee said he doubted health officials would try to get fluoride in the Ashburton water supply again. However, health officials were working with councils in

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Bede O'Malley
Ashburton mayor

other areas to try to get supplies fluoridated.

Lee said binding referendums — as used in Ashburton — often went against health promoters as those most opposed were diligent in getting votes in.

He criticised the media for failing to adequately investigate the issues raised in the fluoride debate.

In 2005, a binding referendum in Greymouth saw a resounding win for the "no" vote following a bitter tussle between health officials and the anti-fluoride lobby.

In 2006, Timaru councillors refused to reconsider fluoridation, pointing to its rejection in a 1996 referendum, and Christchurch city councillors roundly dismissed it in 2005.

Fluoride resurfaced as an issue in Ashburton last year, four years after it was removed from the water supply on a narrow vote by councillors.

The medical officer of health for the area, Dr Daniel Williams, asked the Ashburton council to revisit the issue, citing a 25% increase in dental decay in six-year-olds.

The council did a random survey of town and rural residents, with 56% in favour of fluoridation in town.