Neel Kothari discusses oral health when it comes to water fluoridation, or is it the future to consider is the effects of dental fluorosis on our children? Fluoridation is beneficial to the public or is it merely a way of making it happen. Whether water fluoridation is beneficial to the public or not, I question whether health ministers are really concerned with the effects of decay on children's dental health all receive fluoridated water. Five-year olds in South Staffordshire have the best teeth, while South Birmingham ranks eighth best.

Secondly, one of the arguments presented by anti-fluoridation campaigners, clearly some of the arguments have a lack of foundation and verge on scaremongering rather than drawing from a solid evidence base. But some of the arguments presented are harder to deconstruct, such as from those people who on principle object to mass medication or from those people who simply do not want it in their drinking water. One other factor to consider is the effects of dental fluorosis on our patients. For some this is a minor cosmetic trade off for having healthy teeth, whilst for others there is an expensive future of whitening and veneers of the horizon.

The fluoride debate

Are health ministers really concerned with the public's oral health when it comes to water fluoridation, or is it an easy way to lessen the burden on the NHS? Five-year old children from Southampton have over twice as many teeth affected by decay as those from South Birmingham and around three times more than those from South Staffordshire. During 2007, over 320 children in Southampton had a general anaesthetic to have a total of 2,940 teeth extracted.

BDA in favour
From this it is clear that the BDA is in favour of water fluoridation and on a personal note, I too can see its preventative benefits, but at what point does this become an issue of consent? And are we ever justified in imposing a treatment solution on an unwilling patient?

In a consultation such as in Southampton, 72 per cent of respondents are in opposition to water fluoridation and the local SHAs have decided to go ahead with water fluoridation for those areas at high risk of dental caries. The most recent case which attracted controversy was that of South Central SHA's decision to push ahead with water fluoridation and around Southampton, which, despite a 72 per cent opposition (10,000 respondents) and the County Council opposing the plan in a local consultation, still went through.

My fear here is not that water fluoridation has been pushed through against the will of the local population, but whether this has delayed local democracy in doing so?

Pros and cons
Trying to gather more evidence to weigh up the pros and cons, I looked at why the British Dental Association (BDA) had decided to endorse South Central SHA's decision to introduce water fluoridation. In a statement on this decision, the BDA stated: Fluoridation will play an important role in reducing the worryingly high levels of dental decay in Southampton where as many as 42 per cent of five-year olds have experienced tooth decay.

Studies of people's teeth in fluoridated and non-fluoridated areas demonstrate the beneficial effects of fluoridation on dental health over time. For instance, a survey of five-year olds by the British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry (BASCOD) in 2005-6 found that six of the top ten places in Britain for children's dental health all receive fluoridated water. Five-year olds in South Staffordshire have the best teeth, while South Birmingham ranks eighth best.

Five-year old children from Southampton have over twice as many teeth affected by decay as those from South Birmingham and around three times more than those from South Staffordshire. During 2007, over 320 children in Southampton had a general anaesthetic to have a total of 2,940 teeth extracted.

Lack of foundation?
When reading through some of the literature presented by fluoridation campaigners, clearly some of the arguments have a lack of foundation and verge on scaremongering rather than drawing from a solid evidence base. But some of the arguments presented are harder to deconstruct, such as from those people who on principle object to mass medication or from those people who simply do not want it in their drinking water. One other factor to consider is the effects of dental fluorosis on our patients. For some this is a minor cosmetic trade off for having healthy teeth, whilst for others there is an expensive future of whitening and veneers of the horizon, all of course currently not freely available under the NHS!

The opponents of water fluoridation also point out that there are other ways to reduce levels of decay among high-risk children and that decay rates have been consistently decreasing in both fluoridated and non-fluoridated areas. Although I can see that there are other ways to reduce decay, in my opinion water fluoridation offers us a considerable advantage in helping high-risk children to avoid unnecessary dental intervention, however I accept that not everyone holds this view and that not everyone will stand to benefit from fluoridation.

As more SHAs look at the need for water fluoridation in the years to come, this will no doubt lead to numerous public consultations with most health authorities in high-risk areas to deal with. Whether water fluoridation is beneficial to the public or not, I question whether health ministers are really concerned with this issue or if this is seen as an easy way to lessen the burden on NHS dentistry? If ministers were really concerned with the effects of decay on those from socially deprived areas then why not tax sugar, along with alcohol and tobacco?

While it would be convenient for the Government to disregard opposition to water fluoridation as mere scaremongering, this issue clearly raises a very strong opposition. In my mind, the arguments for water fluoridation in high-risk areas do outweigh the arguments against it. It is also clear that this argument has not been won in the court of public opinion and as such, while water fluoridation may help its desired demographic, a small segment of democracy has clearly been trampled on making it happen.