

Another fight over fluoride

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The state's most bitterly contested political campaign isn't about war or abortion or taxes. It isn't pitting Democrats against Republicans.

But what's going on up in Bellingham is setting records — for campaign spending in that city and, some say, for vitriol. "I've lived here all my life and I've never seen anything like it," said Curt Smith, 70.

Smith is a retired dentist. He's accused of being some sort of Dr. Death who's trying to poison or drug the city. Twice someone has dumped dead rats at his house.

How did he so rile up this lefty college town?

He suggested they put fluoride in the drinking water. You know, because it's good for your teeth.

You can see the tenor of the debate in a brochure from Bellingham Citizens Against Fluoride. It features a faucet, out of which drips a droplet of water containing ... a skull and bones.

"We're campaigning against fear, pure and simple," Smith said. "I expected a debate about science and public-health goals. But the distrust of science, the cynicism about the motivations of scientific or medical institutions — it's shocking to me."

It all started when a group of dentists and doctors became alarmed about tooth decay in Bellingham. Nearly one-quarter of third-graders there have seven or more cavities, a rate three times higher than in King County.

So they sponsored an initiative to fluoridate the water, as Seattle and most American cities have done for decades. It's on the city ballot Tuesday.

I don't begrudge anyone asking tough questions when a chemical is about to be placed in their drinking water.

But what's disturbing about the Bellingham debate is how much it has trivialized science. Something in society — be it ready information on the Internet, the political divide, something — has turned us into a nation of relativists in which all ideas now are equally valid.

You can see it with issues like global warming and evolution. The actual findings of scientists scarcely matter. What matters is what Google says.

And if you type the word "fluoridation" into the Google search engine, eight of the first 10 Web sites say fluoride in drinking water causes cancer, brain damage or bone disease. Some in Bellingham are saying they did such a Google search to explain why they now have a skull-and-bones sign in their yards.

And yet there is overwhelming scientific consensus that this is false — that fluoride in drinking water is at a minimum not harmful and also helps prevent cavities. It's been studied for a century. We've had it in Seattle water since 1970.

That's not to say all scientists agree, or that the question is settled forever. But those caveats can be made about most any scientific issue.

I see Bellingham as a bellwether. If voters in one of the state's most educated cities can convince themselves they'll be killed by fluoride, it makes me wonder if we'll ever agree to tackle global warming or any of the truly challenging questions of science.

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