

# Indian experts clash over toothpaste fluoridation

Whether or not to use fluoridated toothpaste is at the center of a renewed debate in India, in light of reports of increasing incidence of fluorosis — a disease caused by ingesting excess amounts of fluorides — via the drinking water in many parts of India. Fluorosis has crippled an estimated 30 million Indians, including children as young as 2 years old, and has put another 15 million at risk, according to a recent

national survey.

Despite the growing concern, a recent proposal by the Indian government health ministry that manufacturers of fluoridated toothpaste must print a statutory warning that children should not use the product was abandoned owing to pressure from dental lobby. "No country in the world has warned against fluoride toothpaste, so why should we do it?" asks Loveleen Kumar

Gandhi, dental adviser to the government and an influential member of the Dental Council of India (DCI) — a body representing the country's 30,000 dentists. Gandhi said that the council, which met last month, refused to endorse the government's proposal, arguing that a typical tube of toothpaste contains less fluoride than that found in a cup of tea. Despite the dental lobby's success in scuttling the warning, the government will still require that the label on toothpaste cartons show the amount of fluorides inside the tube, but without warning or explanation.

But the government's capitulation to the dental lobby has other scientists outraged. "It is pointless and even dangerous to add fluoride to toothpaste when Indians are already getting too much fluorides from natural water," says Andezhath Kumaran Susheela, a professor of anatomy at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). Susheela, who has been spearheading a national campaign for fluoride-free toothpaste, alleges that the Dental Council of India has become a tool of multinational companies in promoting their products, but hides that fact by taking cover under the World Health Organization's (WHO) declared policy that "fluoridation prevents dental caries," referring to a 1994 WHO report advocating "affordable" fluoride toothpaste for developing countries.

An official at the WHO regional office in Delhi denies that the policy is adding to India's problems with fluorosis, saying that the report's recommendations were obviously not meant for situations "where there is an excessive [fluoride] content in water."

Both sides of the debate agree that fluoride levels of about 1 part per million (ppm) in drinking water can help prevent tooth decay. But India's ground water — the source of drinking water for 85 percent of the population — contains up to 38.5 ppm, because the Earth's crust of the Indian subcontinent is very rich in fluoride minerals. In fact, in the last 10 years the government spent more than \$300 million in setting up defluoridation plants to try to bring the fluoride content of drinking water to safe levels.

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## HHMI supports post-Eastern bloc researchers

It has been almost fifty years since Trofim Denisovich Lysenko rose to prominence by denouncing Mendelian thought as "reactionary and decadent," effectively gutting Russian biology. However, a meeting held in June in Prague, Czech Republic, of researchers from the Baltics, Central Europe and the former Soviet Union suggests that, although Lysenko might have dimmed the fire, the embers left are again being blown into life. The source of the encouragement, and the money, is the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI).

Although it is known more for its support of approximately 280 US investigators, HHMI also operates a grant program that awards in excess of US\$80 million annually. Although most of this goes to the support of science education in the United States, in recent years HHMI has funneled more of that money into supporting biomedical scientists in other countries (HHMI lists 143 "International Research Scholars" as receiving such grants).

The ninety researchers from former Soviet-bloc countries receiving HHMI grants were chosen from approximately 2,000 applications received by HHMI last year. The competition, overseen by Daniel Nathans, an HHMI investigator and Nobel prize winner at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, followed similar grant competitions in Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. A new HHMI grants competition is currently under way in several Latin America countries.

Each of the ninety researchers chosen, and their home institutions, will receive five-year grants from HHMI of US\$22,000 to \$35,000 annually. Although this may seem small in comparison to the big-budget laboratories of the West, these grants represent a significant investment to scientists who often cannot afford to pay for basic life needs, much less research costs.

Many of the researchers chosen to receive the HHMI grants have had significant contact with Western laboratories over the past few years, enabling them to catch up quickly in an area as rapidly changing as modern biomedical research. Although they still face significant difficulties in their own countries, there is a sense that their work is being taken seriously abroad, and that they can make lasting contributions to the field.

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Scientists at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) meeting in Prague discuss their research with meeting participants. Antal Kiss (left) of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is Szeged, Hungary discusses his work with Jean Schroder of HHMI. Tatyana L. Azhikina (right) describes her work with two other participants.