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Growing positivity for water fluoridation on social media



Positivity on the topic of water fluoridation is growing on Twitter where the number of supporters has grown from nil to 19% in five years. By contrast, Facebook is a platform where opposition to water fluoridation has remained constant.

These are among the conclusions drawn from a paper¹ which compares identical studies analysing social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook. Carried out five years apart, in 2015 and 2021, the studies looked at the public's perception of water fluoridation as expressed on social media. Accounts were divided into three groups: supportive, anti or neutral to water fluoridation.

Water fluoridation is a topic which invokes strong feelings, with libertarians opposing the view that fluoride should be adjusted in drinking water supplies alongside chemicals that prevent disease, such as chlorine, which protects from cholera and typhoid. This is counter to the view of most healthcare organisations, especially dental, which support all measures designed to improve health through universal measures.

British Fluoridation Society (BFS) member Rebecca Linney (pictured) undertook the 2015 study as part of her dental degree to understand how social media was being used by campaigners. Dr Linney was fascinated by the topic because she comes from Liverpool where the water is not fluoridated, but undertook her dental degree in fluoridated Birmingham.

In March of this year, she repeated the study to test whether there had been a change in perceptions. A key finding of her comparison is that today, 19% of Twitter accounts featuring water fluoridation support the public health measure, whereas in 2015 there were no pro-water fluoridation accounts at all.

Barry Cockcroft, Chairman of BFS, said: "This paper is really useful in understanding how important it is to continue to communicate clear and scientific statements about water fluoridation. The fact is, unless we keep active on social media, opponents will fill that vacuum. This is a most valuable piece of work."

Reference

1. Linney R. *A comparison of the public's perception of water fluoridation based on social media posts between June 2015 and March 2021*. May 2021. Available at: <https://bfsweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/rebecca-linney-A-comparison-of-the-publics-perception-of-Water-Fluoridation-based-on-social-media-posts-between-June-2015-and-March-2021.pdf> (accessed May 2021). ✦