



Speech by

Ms Grace Grace

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

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WATER FLUORIDATION BILL

Ms GRACE (Brisbane Central—ALP) (2.30 pm): The Water Fluoridation Bill 2008 will finally deliver for Queensland a holistic approach to better dental health. Dental decay rates can be reduced by up to 40 per cent through good oral hygiene, diet and nutrition and now water fluoridation. This initiative of the Bligh government announced on 5 December 2007 will be acknowledged as one of the most significant public health measures.

Research has confirmed that fluoride helps to repair minor dental tissue damage and promotes enamel resistance against tooth decay and this has been seen as a great benefit for both children and adults. I believe that it is not acceptable to continue to have Queenslanders missing out on the benefits of fluoridation. The current situation where Queenslanders have the worst rates of tooth decay in Australia should not be allowed to continue.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Queensland children have almost twice the number of fillings as Victorian children with our five- to 12-year-old children having more decay than their peers in any other state. My own personal experience with fluoride is when my daughter's first teeth for some unexplained reason were what can only be described as chalky and during her childhood resulted in some of her teeth, particularly her eye teeth, ending up about half their normal size. In consulting with our dentist it was determined that the best thing that I could do to improve and ensure a second set of healthy teeth for my daughter was to give her fluoride, which I have done in the form of a tablet for many years. She is now 13. I also add that the fluoride tablets were not always available and were quite costly, which is why I believe water fluoridation is good—equitable public policy. I am pleased to report that due to my efforts my daughter now has perfect teeth and, unlike her mother who had a mouthful of cavities and fillings by 13—maybe due to Brisbane's lack of fluoridated water—has no cavities or fillings whatsoever. Obviously good dental hygiene also assisted, but I am convinced that it was largely the fluoride treatment that gave her a great set of second teeth.

There is one major difference which may explain why Queenslanders have the worst rates of tooth decay compared with other states and this is that currently only five per cent of Queenslanders have access to fluoridated water and that Brisbane is the only Australian capital city that does not fluoridate its water supply. Queensland's figure of five per cent access for its citizens compares most unfavourably across Australia where between 75 per cent and 100 per cent of state and territory populations have access to fluoridated water. To reverse this situation, this bill will enable government to work with local councils and water suppliers to provide fluoridated water for up to 80 per cent of Queenslanders within two years and more than 90 per cent of Queenslanders by 2012, with a fund of \$35 million to roll out the capital program needed to meet these targets.

I believe that this is a definite step in the right direction. The Bligh government is not expecting local government to pay for this initiative and is putting its money behind good public policy and shouldering the burden. As other jurisdictions are recording an overall decline in tooth decay over two generations, Queensland spends more than any other state or territory on oral health, with over \$145 million in this financial year. This bill will replace a statutory duty on all water suppliers who supply drinking water to over 1,000 persons to add fluoride to the public water supply under their control or management. In addition,

water suppliers with less than 1,000 people may decide to add fluoride to the water supply but it will not be mandatory to do so. This acknowledges that not all drinking water supplies will be suitable for fluoridation. The bill also provides that the minister may grant an exemption of the obligation to fluoride. This is a most sensible provision and recognises that in some instances natural fluoride in the water is either at an average concentration or within the prescribed limits or above the maximum prescribed limit and therefore does not need any top up or where adding fluoride to the water is unlikely to result in a substantial ongoing oral health benefit. For example, this may occur where the town water is bore water which has a pungent odour and is generally not consumed by the community.

The bill also provides for the formation of the Queensland Fluoridation Committee, which will be an expert committee established to advise the minister about the safety and efficacy of fluoridation of drinking water supplies and also advise the minister when deciding whether to grant or not grant an exemption. I welcome the formation of the Queensland Fluoridation Committee, which I believe will play an important role in ensuring that the safety of the community is paramount and that this bill will deliver tangible benefits for the oral health of Queenslanders.

At this stage I think it is important to acknowledge that there are some in the community who are opposed and concerned at the prospect of fluoridated water. Indeed, I have received many emails and letters in opposition from constituents in my area and I have also met with constituents who have outlined their concerns to me in my office. I take this opportunity to thank them for the information they have provided to me and the frank discussions we have had over this issue. Any good debate hears all sides of the argument.

I can assure my constituents that I have read fully all the information provided. However, I believe that the ongoing dental health benefit through fluoridation, together with the large community support for this bill, outweighs these concerns. In addition, there is also extensive, credible, scientific evidence to dispel many fears about the health and safety of water fluoridation. In particular, I refer to the support by the Australian Dental Association, Queensland Branch, and the Dental Hygienists Association of Australia, Queensland Branch, which also support this bill. I must admit that the dentists and hygienists that I have spoken to in my electorate are very supportive of the bill and most congratulatory of the stance taken by the Premier and the Minister for Health.

We only need to compare the results of Queenslanders with the rest of Australia who have had water fluoridation for many years. Queenslanders have the highest level of tooth decay. Even when comparing children aged five to 12 in Townsville, which has had fluoridated water since 1964, with Brisbane children, Townsville children have 45 per cent less tooth decay. In both cases these improved dental health benefits have been achieved with fluoridation, with no adverse health and safety effects.

There are many common fluoride myths and beliefs, such as fluoride causes cancer, allergies, arthritis, bone fracture, excessive dental fluorosis and is bad for babies et cetera. In all of these cases there is ample scientific and medical evidence and support for fluoride to be added to our waterways. However, if members of the community are still not convinced by these findings and are concerned about fluoridated water it is important to note that there is still a choice for those who elect not to drink fluoridated water. These options include bottled water, tank water and reverse osmosis water filters. I welcome any reports from the soon-to-be-established expert Queensland Fluoridation Committee, which will report on any health and safety effects following the passing of this bill, which should provide some comfort to the community.

I look forward to the evidence of improvements in oral health which should be apparent within five years of implementation of water fluoridation achieved simply by adding a small amount of fluoride to top up the natural levels already present which equates to roughly one drop in a bathtub of water. Fluoridation is one of the most widely researched public health measures in the world and is endorsed by the World Health Organisation and a large number of scientific and medical bodies here and overseas.

As mentioned earlier, Townsville water has been fluoridated since 1964 and every other state and territory has been drinking fluoridated water for more than 30 years with no credible evidence to link water fluoridation with adverse health effects. It is for these reasons that I support the bill and welcome the improved benefits in oral health for Queenslanders that will follow. I take this opportunity to congratulate all members of the House who are supporting this bill but in particular to congratulate the Premier and the Minister for Health for finally having the political resolve to advance this policy which brings Queensland in line with every other state and territory on the issue of water fluoridation. I commend the bill to the House.