

Location: San Diego

Issue: San Diego's Community Water Fluoridation

Methodology: Viewpoint Learning – Choice Dialogue

Link to more: <http://www.viewpointlearning.com/publications/reports.shtml>

Between June 2005 and May 2007, Viewpoint Learning conducted a series of eight Choice Dialogues sessions that focused on the issue of whether the City of San Diego should fluoridate its water. Sponsored by Dental Health Foundation of California and University of California - Berkeley, the community discussions were attended by 294 participants, randomly selected to represent diverse ethnic, political and socio-economic backgrounds. During the eight Choice Dialogue sessions participants filled out extensive questionnaires regarding their opinion, and the sessions were videotaped. In each session the participants developed a vision for oral health in San Diego (priorities/tradeoffs); the second half consisted of participants examining their vision as well as studying advocacy materials [both favoring/opposing CWF (community water fluoridation)], which showed how pressures of actual campaigns affected the decision-making process. The participants surveyed the materials given according to credibility and importance, as well as their earlier opinion about whether or not to fluoridate.

After all eight dialogues it became clear that out of the 294 San Diegan participants, while 64% initially supported community water fluoridation (CWF), by the end of the dialogues support for CWF fell to 49%. During the dialogues 48% of participants could be categorized as “consistent supporters” of CWF, while 35% of participants could be categorized as “consistent opponents” of CWF leaving 17% of participants as switchers to their original opinion. Consistent supporters of CWF argued water fluoridation works, water fluoridation benefits the young, the old and the medically undeserved, and water fluoridation is cost-effective. Consistent opponents of CWF argued that people already get enough fluoride, we shouldn't add unnecessary chemicals to our water and fluoridation violates personal choice. Although many participants realized that water fluoridation was not sufficient enough for maintaining healthy teeth, by the end of the day 82% of participants agreed that “fluoridation is especially helpful to the young, the old, and people without dental care.” Roughly two-thirds (63%) of the participants agreed that CWF violated an individual's right to chose their own lifestyle, but 76% of participants felt the community possessed the “right to make public health decisions, even if some object” especially if the rights being violated have an beneficial impact on the community as a whole.

As for the scientific evidence concerning fluoridation for dental care, the limits of information and the critical role of trust were very significant issues for the participants, which was shown through their responses. Choice Dialogue scenarios helped public

health experts engage the participants on a controversial issue such as CWF through the realization that information alone would not build support for change — experts cannot “sell” a change like CWF as a product. Choice Dialogues demonstrated that maintaining trust was the most significant factor for building public support for a public health issue such as implemented community water fluoridation.

In the final questionnaires, just like the initial questionnaires, consistent supporters backed CWF and consistent opponents opposed CWF, while switchers changed their position at the end of the day. In both final and initial questionnaires 249 of the 294 participants could be classified as supporters or opponents of CWF out of which 119 participants were consistent supporters, 88 were consistent opponents, 35 switched from support to opposition and 7 switched from opposition to support.