

## San Antonio's Battle Over Fluoridation

"Public Opinion," observed Mark Twain, "is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it is the voice of God." Indeed, Americans hold the "voice of the people" in high esteem. Since the Progressive Era, ballot initiatives have gained favor as alternatives to the legislative process. Last year, U.S. voters cast ballots in hundreds of state and local referendums. Here, Jack H. Scudder and Neil Spitzer report on one referendum campaign over an odd, recurring struggle in American politics: fluoridation of the local public water supply.

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*by Jack H. Scudder and Neil Spitzer*

In September 1985, most politicians and journalists in San Antonio forecast a stormy autumn. During the coming two months, wrote Kemper Diehl, a columnist for the San Antonio *Express-News*, local citizens would witness a "political circus" with many "bizarre sideshows." Indeed, warned Mike Tolson of the San Antonio *Light*, San Antonians would have to endure a barrage of "wild rhetoric, misinformation, frequent silliness, and general jabberwocky."

What lay ahead? The city had already held its mayoralty election (in April). The next congressional race would not take place for a year. And a controversial plan to cover the winding San Antonio River and turn it into a sewer had long lain dormant.

Messrs. Diehl and Tolson were referring to something familiar in the city's political history: a November referendum that asked the voters of San Anto-

nio to decide whether the city should, for reasons of dental health, add fluoride to its public water supply.

The two seasoned newspapermen knew that the fluoride question would not come and go quietly. San Antonians had fought two fluoride battles before. In April 1966, the city council passed an ordinance that instructed the city fathers to fluoridate the city's main water supply. After a bitterly fought campaign, San Antonians defeated fluoridation, 68 to 32 percent. In 1977, the council again considered fluoridating the city's water supply, but the "antis" raised such a fuss that the council refrained from even calling the matter to a vote.

Moreover, Diehl and Tolson knew that San Antonians value their pure springwater, which bubbles out of south-central Texas's rolling hill country. As it flows toward the Gulf of Mexico, much of the water seeps into a porous lime-



*Neither preachers from heaven nor demons from hell could make most San Antonians care about fluoride. Fewer than one in five went to the polls.*

stone outcrop called the Balcones Escarpment, which stretches across southern Texas—nearly all the way from Austin to the Rio Grande. This 500-foot-thick layer of limestone comprises the Edwards Aquifer. Water pumped from the aquifer serves as the sole source of drinking water for over one million people who live in and around the city of San Antonio.

Thus, the members of the San Antonio city council must have known they were being watched when they voted 7 to 4, on May 30, 1985, to raise the level of fluoride in the water supply from the existing 0.3 to 0.8 parts per million (ppm).<sup>\*</sup> Even so, the council and the city's other politicians expected that the residents of San Antonio—like the resi-

dents of 1,457 other Texas hamlets, towns, and cities—would soon be drinking fluoridated water.

Much had changed, after all, since San Antonians had rejected fluoride, by a 2 to 1 margin, in 1966. Since then, hundreds of reputable studies had confirmed that raising the level of fluoride in public drinking supplies to about 1 ppm safely inhibits tooth decay by as much as 50 to 60 percent, especially among young children. And since then, the American Medical Association, the American Dental Association, the U.S. Public Health Service, and the World Health Organization had reaffirmed their earlier endorsements of water fluoridation.

Moreover, water fluoridation had become a common practice. Some 63 percent of all Americans (and 70 percent of all Texans) served by public water supplies drank fluoridated water. They in-

<sup>\*</sup>Fluoride appears naturally in many water supplies, including San Antonio's (at 0.3 ppm).

cluded the inhabitants of 41 of the nation's 50 largest cities—among them Dallas and Houston.\*

Since 1966, San Antonio had also matured into a progressive Sunbelt city, eager to adopt modern ways. During and after World War II, San Antonio's five military installations (Kelly, Lackland, Randolph, and Brooks Air Force Bases, and Fort Sam Houston) expanded rapidly, pumping billions of dollars into the local economy. In 1968, the University of Texas decided to locate its new Health Science Center in northwest San Antonio. The center's five schools (of medicine, nursing, dentistry, biomedical sciences, and allied health sciences), together with several other hospitals, formed the South Texas Medical Center, which comprised one of the nation's leading "biomedical hubs." Like San Antonio's burgeoning military complex, the growing medical center provided jobs to thousands of college-educated professionals who would settle in nearby Oak Hills, Elm Creek, and other well-to-do neighborhoods.

In all, San Antonio's population climbed by 20 percent during the 1970s. With a population of 921,693, San Antonio now ranks as Texas's third (and the nation's 10th) largest city.

#### Mayor Cisneros Speaks

In many respects, San Antonio's popular, well-educated 38-year-old mayor, Henry Cisneros, personified the city; he was, like 53 percent of all San Antonians, Mexican-American. He was also, like the city, on his way up. Since his first election in 1981, Mayor Cisneros had man-

\*The nine largest U.S. cities without fluoridation in 1987: Los Angeles, San Diego, San José, Phoenix, Tucson, Newark, Honolulu, Portland (Oregon), and San Antonio.

aged to unify the city's sometimes fractious Hispanic and Anglo communities. He did so under the banner of making San Antonio a good place to do business. "His issues are not ethnic," wrote journalist Paul Burka in the *Texas Monthly*. "He would rather talk about economic development and jobs than bilingual education or discrimination."

#### Cancer, Poison, Fluorosis

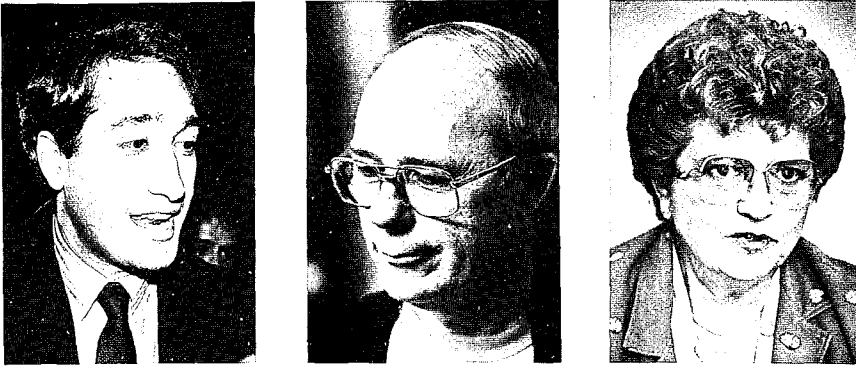
Cisneros believed that San Antonio should fluoridate its water supply, because that was something that progressive, forward-looking, and health-conscious cities did. "How will medical experts across the country react," the mayor asked, "if we turn out to be the only major Texas city to reject a proven health measure like water fluoridation?"

The campaign to fluoridate San Antonio's water supply got under way in 1984, when dentists, dental students, and other members of the city's Oral Health Association who were concerned about the above-average incidence of dental cavities in the community began to lobby for fluoridation. The following spring, they prodded city councilman Ed Harrington to bring water fluoridation up for discussion at the council's May 23, 1985, meeting. With their eyes on that meeting, local civic groups sought to rally support for fluoride. On May 8, the trustees of San Antonio's prestigious Target '90 Commission—which some 400 community and business leaders formed in 1983 to help promote the region as a high-tech "silicon prairie"—met to consider endorsing fluoridation. Councilwoman Helen Dutmer, from the city's Third District, voiced her dissent.

"I do not feel it's the government's responsibility to dispense medication," said the representative of the city's

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*Mayor Henry Cisneros (left) favored fluoride, but let a usually mild-mannered councilman, Ed Harrington (center), who reveled in the fight, take on Councilwoman Helen Dutmer (right) and other fluoride foes.*

largely white, blue-collar southeast corner. "And if you don't believe it's a medication, just try and buy it at the drugstore without a prescription."

Nevertheless, the Target '90 Commission's trustees voted overwhelmingly to endorse fluoridation. And two weeks later, on May 22, the city's largest daily newspaper, the San Antonio *Express-News* (circulation: 180,365), added its approval. "The opponents of fluoridation," the paper said, "have had numerous opportunities to tell their horror stories, none of which has come true in the other cities with fluoridated water."

At the May 23 council meeting, representatives of the Health Science Center, the Oral Health Association, and the American Heart Association spoke in favor of fluoridation. A visiting University of Kansas chemist, Dr. Albert Burgstahler, argued, however, that fluoride caused mottling of the teeth and had proved harmful to flowers and hamsters. Despite his testimony, the council decided to vote on an ordinance calling for the fluoridation of the city's water supply, at its next meeting, on May 30.

On the eve of the May 30 vote, the profluoride forces garnered support from the San Antonio Community of Churches

and the St. Philip of Jesus Health Center. With Mayor Cisneros joining the majority, the city council approved, 7 to 4, an ordinance that directed the Water Board to "provide for fluoridation of all water supplies within its distribution system."

With so many reputable national and local organizations supporting their cause, fluoride proponents, at this point, seemingly needed to overcome only what the *Express-News* called "a few fanatical opponents."

One of them was Mary Hicks, a 60-year-old partner in Park Laboratory Company, a small San Antonio business that sold arnica salve, oil of peppermint, roseated oil, eardrops, liniment, tonics, laxative tea, and other such medications.

Hicks, who had earned a bachelor's degree in bacteriology, opposed fluoride primarily for health reasons. Fluoride is a poison, she argued, "used for etching glass, killing rodents, with cumulative effects on the body." A long-time anti-fluoride activist, she prepared a loose-leaf scrapbook, crammed with anti-fluoride articles, divided into different categories—such as "cancer," "poison," and "fluorosis"—which she copied and sent to other sympathizers.

Hicks was joined in the battle by Kay

Walker, a 38-year-old San Antonio public relations consultant. Walker, who formed the "Right to Choose" Committee in July 1985, opposed fluoridation because she believed it denied people the right to choose their own medication. "I oppose fluoridation of *all* our water because we all consume different volumes of water, [and] thus can't control our dosage," she said. "I attended the council meeting where fluoridation was discussed and was upset by the ramrod methods. I felt the council was arrogant and pompous."

A third enemy of fluoride was San Antonio's self-described "irascible old coot," C. A. Stubbs. He opposed fluoride on fiscal grounds. As president of the Bexar County Homeowner-Taxpayer Association (HTA), the 62-year-old Stubbs argued that San Antonians should not have to pay the initial \$703,000 capital outlay, plus \$261,000 in annual service costs, for something that they could well do without. Sporting a Stetson, Buddy Holly glasses, and Western tie, Stubbs complained that "they want to spend money for the arts, for fluoride, while critical shortages exist in police and fire protection."

#### Activating Enzymes

Together, Hicks, Walker, and Stubbs comprised what turned out to be a formidable antifluoride team. Observed Councilwoman Dutmer: "Stubbs had the people, and Mary [Hicks] had the information," while Walker added organizational skills and marketing talent.

The fluoride opponents also gained the help of several out-of-state reinforcements, such as Dr. John Lee, a Mill Valley, California, physician. A celebrated fluoride foe, Lee flew to San Antonio in March 1985 to add credibility to their cause. At a press conference held in the downtown El Tropicano Hotel, Lee claimed that the city's death rate from cancer and heart disease would jump by 10 percent within five years if fluoride

were added to the water.

"It is not clear from any available evidence that fluoride does any good at all, but it is clear that it is toxic," Lee observed. "I have studied this 1,000 percent more than any doctor or dentist you will ever meet, and their viewpoints are not acceptable."

In a 35-minute antifluoride tape that he had made—and Mrs. Hicks copied and distributed—Lee argued that "our bodies' enzymes are inhibited by fluoride. The only enzyme not inhibited by fluoride is the respiratory enzyme in cancer cells. They are activated by it."

#### Quackery over Science

Even so, Hicks, Walker, and Stubbs seemed to have little chance of reversing the city council's May 30 decision. But the three antifluoridationists persevered.

Their first mission was to collect enough signatures to put the council's ordinance up for a popular vote on the November ballot, along with 14 unexciting proposed amendments to the state constitution. Working out of Stubbs's small HTA headquarters, Hicks's home, and Walker's garage, the triumvirate dispatched some 250 neighborhood volunteers—mostly students and working-class housewives—to collect signatures. Mayor Cisneros urged San Antonians not to sign the petition; such a referendum, he said, would cost the taxpayers \$200,000 and divide the city. Stubbs and Hicks protested: "It is [the profluoride people] who threw down the gauntlet that is dividing this city."

In any case, by going from door to door, and by approaching shoppers on downtown street corners and fans at sports events, the volunteers collected, in eight weeks, more than the 40,488 signatures needed to put the fluoride ordinance on the November ballot.

As in most autumn political contests, the fluoride campaign began in earnest around Labor Day. The antifluoridationists peppered San Antonians with

leaflets, doorknob hangers, and bumper stickers. One persuasive antifuoride leaflet pictured a skull next to a water faucet, and read: "It's Your Water, Your Health, Your Taxes, and Your Freedom." The pamphlet warned that "the number of mongoloid children born to younger mothers [has] been found to be higher in fluoridated than in nonfluoridated cities."

Profluoride volunteers, meanwhile, delivered a four-page leaflet to some 130,000 homes in the city. The leaflet listed 70 local, national, and international organizations that had endorsed fluoridation, ranging from the San Antonio Dental Society to the U.S. Department of Defense. It also cited a 1978 *Consumer Reports* study, which found fluoride safe and effective. "The survival of this fake controversy," declared the tabloid, quoting the study, "is one of the major triumphs of quackery over science in our generation."

#### AIDS, Too

The antis waited until one month before the vote before bringing in their heavy artillery: Dr. John Yiamouyiannis, a biochemist from Delaware, Ohio, and the author of *Fluoride, the Aging Factor* (1983). An articulate veteran of many fluoride battles in other cities, and a roving spokesman for the antifuoride cause, Yiamouyiannis charged that fluoride attacked the body's immune system and was responsible for colds, premature aging, arthritis, birth defects, and even cancer. In *The Aging Factor*, he contended that fluoride kills 30,000 to 50,000 Americans every year.

In San Antonio, as elsewhere in the past, the Ohio biochemist established himself as a skilled political tactician. He offered, for example, a \$10,000 reward to anyone who could disprove any one of 10 antifuoridation claims—that fluoride causes genetic damage, cancer, skin eruptions, gastric distress, etc.

Mayor Cisneros dismissed the contest



*The fluoride battle, as one San Antonio reporter observed, helped elevate tax opponent C. A. Stubbs from a "gadfly" to "Big Spoiler."*

as "gimmickry," but it proved effective in gaining free local media coverage. There was little chance that anyone would actually win the booty. Challengers had to pay \$50 just to enter the contest, and the judges were none other than Mrs. Helen Dutmer and Dr. Yiamouyiannis.

As time went on, both sides bought television and radio air time. But the fluoride battle of 1985 was also fought through the city's two daily newspapers, the *Express-News* and the *Light*. Both papers provided detailed campaign coverage, and voiced, on their editorial pages, their support for fluoride.

In fact, *Express-News* columnist Paul Thompson became one of fluoride's most enthusiastic advocates—and one who never minced words. "The anti-fluoride crowd this week launched the battle for your mind by bringing to town their top

national 'mouth'—John Yiamouyiannis, an Ohio biochemist," Thompson wrote on October 4. Yiamouyiannis, he went on, was "purely and simply . . . a hired gun paid to go around the country, linking fluoride in public drinking water to cancer, mongoloid infants, other birth defects and—eek!—to the unspeakable new human scourge known as AIDS."

### Taking God's Side

In the best "equal time" tradition, the papers gave the antifluoridationists ample opportunity to fire back by publishing their letters to the editor. One antifluoridationist wrote to the *Express News* that "fluoridation not only hardens teeth, it also hardens the arteries and brains." Another said that "it is not the business of government to force-medicate the populace via the water supply"—an argument, the writer went on, that Councilman Ed Harrington's and columnist Paul Thompson's "dwarfed, pickled brains" were simply not capable of comprehending.

Soon, Councilwoman Helen Dutmer, who had voted against the fluoride ordinance, rejoined the debate. Dutmer sent a letter to the *Express-News* after that paper reported on a study showing that elderly people living in Kuopio, Finland, suffered from less osteoporosis, a disease that weakens the bones, because they drank fluoridated water. "Why did you have to go to Europe for your study?" Dutmer wrote in early October. "Because it's the same old fun and games. Who is going to either go, or bother to contact some obscure city in Europe to verify your claims?"

But events seemed to favor Mayor Cisneros and other fluoride proponents during the campaign's final week. On October 28, they scored a major coup when Robert Bernstein, Texas's commissioner of health, announced that the state had approved a \$500,000 grant to San Antonio to help offset the costs of fluoridation—thus undermining the antis' "fiscal

waste" argument. San Antonio's Catholic archbishop, Patrick F. Flores, also endorsed fluoride and sent a letter to all priests and nuns in the area. Fluoride is "a natural substance which was discovered in water," he wrote, "so it may be said that God put it there."

On October 29, San Antonio's ABC affiliate, Channel 12, sponsored a televised debate that the mayor and his allies hoped would seal their victory. Unfortunately for them, the station manager required that all debaters be residents of San Antonio—which disqualified Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, a prestigious figure, whom profluoridationists had wanted to have debate on their behalf. Dr. Yiamouyiannis, the antifluoride star, of course, was not a resident of San Antonio either. In fact, he had lived in Delaware, Ohio, for 16 years, and was even a candidate for a local school board there.

But on the day before the debate, Dr. Yiamouyiannis telephoned the Delaware Board of Elections, and asked that his name be withdrawn from the ballot there. Just hours before the debate, he showed up at the Channel 12 office, with a new San Antonio voter registration card, and took his place in the TV studio—a move that stunned and outraged his adversaries.

### A Dead Rat

During the debate, Mrs. Henry Cisneros, the mayor's wife, sought to assure viewers that fluoride was safe. "Henry and I wouldn't dream of putting something in our water that was harmful to us, our children, or our parents," she said. "We've used Colgate and Crest at home for years," she went on, holding two tubes of toothpaste aloft, "and they both have fluoride in them."

San Antonio's newest resident countered quickly. "What we're talking about here is not just rubbing it on your teeth, as Mrs. Cisneros suggests," Dr. Yiamouyiannis said. "We're talking about con-

suming it. And if Mrs. Cisneros had a small child who consumed a whole tube of fluoridated toothpaste, that child would be dead."

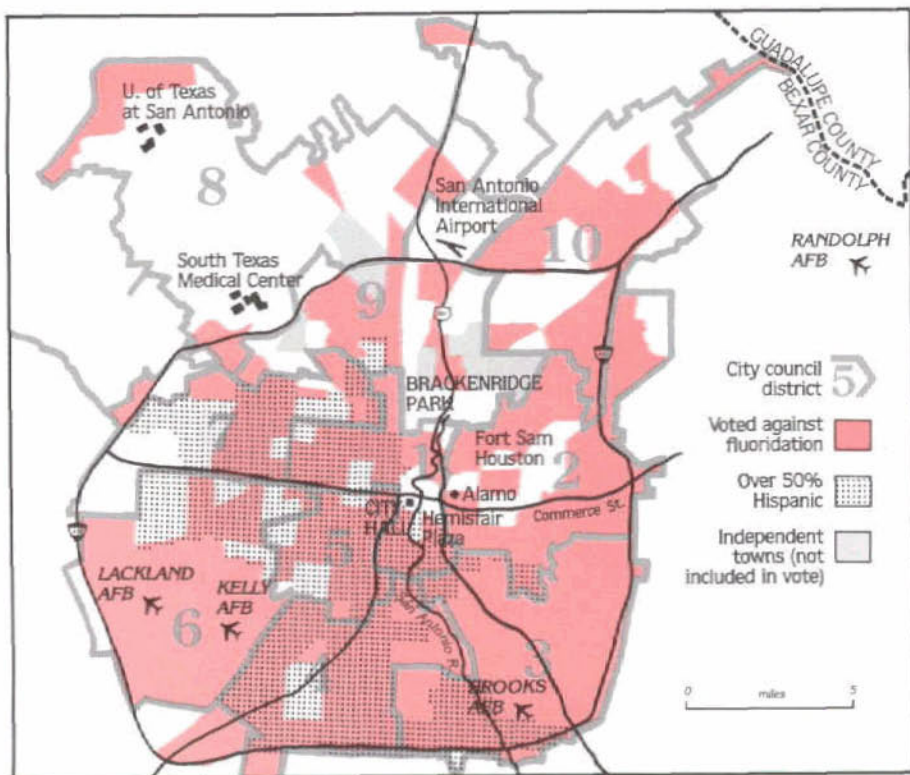
In his concluding remarks, Dr. Yiamouyiannis advised viewers: "If in doubt, vote 'No.'"

Most postdebate analysts agreed that the antis had scored at least a minor victory, sowing confusion and doubt among the citizenry. "Though neither side made any sincere attempt to answer the questions asked," observed David Hawkins of the *Light*, "most observers said that [Yiamouyiannis & Co.] took the night with their barrage of assertions.

To the other side, those [assertions] were cheap and unfair scare rhetoric, but they were also charges difficult to refute in 30 seconds or less."

Several unseemly incidents took place during the campaign's final days. On October 28, the leading profluoride councilman, Ed Harrington, received a parcel in the mail containing a dead rat. An attached anonymous note read: "We fed this rat fluoride water, and look what happened, you dirty commie." Another fluoride proponent, Dr. Elaine Neenan, complained that the tires on her car had been slashed.

For the most part, however, the two



The fluoride battle split the city between north and south. The profluoridationists scored victories in city council Districts 8, 9, and 10—but not by enough to offset losses everywhere else. The antis won by just 3,096 votes.



sides observed the civilities. Stubbs, Hicks, and Yiamouyiannis appeared on local so-called redneck radio call-in shows; most of their callers were sympathetic to the anti cause.

Sensing that the contest was close, fluoride proponents took to the airwaves during the campaign's final days. In fact, throughout the entire campaign, they outspent their opponents, \$85,917 to \$3,095, on television and radio commercials. Both Surgeon General Koop and Mayor Cisneros pressed their arguments in simple, 30-second TV spots that were aired during local newscasts at 6:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M. Urged Cisneros: "It's needed, effective, safe. Vote 'yes' for fluoridation November 5."

The two newspapers saved their strongest words on fluoride for the end. The *Light* published a series of six short articles, called "Facts on Fluoride." One "fact," for example, stated that "there are well-meaning people who are opposed to fluoridation, primarily because they have become frightened by the scare tactics and organized efforts of anti-fluoridationists." The *Express-News*, which editorialized five times on behalf of fluoridation during the campaign, told its readers, two days before the election, that their votes would determine "whether a group of loosely organized naysayers and fearmongers will be allowed to strike a major blow against the great progress that has been made over the past few years."

#### The People Speak

On November 5, 1985, 85,821 San Antonians went to the polls.

The result was no testimonial to the widely touted power of the media, or to the influence of high-status "opinion leaders." The fluoridation ordinance was defeated, by 52 to 48 percent of the votes cast.

The vote divided along socioeconomic lines. Fluoride won among well-to-do Anglos on the north side, and lost among

Hispanics and blue-collar Anglos. Some 55 percent of all precincts with Anglo majorities voted for fluoride; 73 percent of all precincts with Hispanic majorities voted against fluoride—as did *every* Anglo-dominated precinct in Councilwoman Dutmer's so-called redneck district.

"The people have spoken, and I can accept that," said Mayor Cisneros. "Tomorrow we'll bounce back and go on." Perhaps because of the dead rat, Councilman Harrington was less gracious, echoing *Consumer Reports* in calling the defeat "another triumph of quackery and fear over science."

#### Not Life or Death

The result left many observers puzzled: With so much support from the nation's most reputable health organizations, from the local press, from City Hall, and from dozens of respectable community groups, how did fluoride proponents manage to lose?

Some observers blamed Communities Organized for Public Service, an influential local Mexican-American political group that decided not to take a stand on the issue. A Spanish-language newspaper might have rallied Mexican-Americans behind fluoride—but, perhaps surprisingly, no such paper exists in San Antonio. The fact is that the city's Mexican-Americans rarely take full political advantage of their numbers. They represent 53 percent of the population, but only 40 percent of registered voters. And, despite Mayor Cisneros's pleas, just 11.8 percent of eligible voters in Mexican-American precincts did their duty at the polls on November 5.

Even so, fluoride proponents could not fairly blame the defeat on any one group. Opinion surveys showed that San Antonians favored fluoridation by hefty margins, but only 18.9 percent of *all* eligible voters went to the polls; fluoridation was not a "salient" life-or-death issue to those who favored it. The results followed a familiar pattern in American vot-

ing, especially in referendums and primary elections: When apathy is high and turnout is low, the more energetic, more zealous side usually prevails.

The antifuoride message was easier to sell; moreover, the antifuoridationists were fervent believers. The health professionals' sober recitals of the dental benefits of fluoride proved a poor match for the more emotional salvos of the antis who decried fluoride as a "poison" that could damage the immune system, hasten aging, and even cause cancer.

The antis, as columnist Paul Thompson noted, managed to instill a powerful negative emotion in the electorate. "There were the phalanxes of senior citizens all over town," he wrote, who were "literally terrified of fluoride as a result of the propaganda incessantly spewed on four of the leading radio talk shows."

#### Going Home

That fluoride even became an issue seemed to benefit the antis' cause. "The mere fact that the debate even took place," as Michael Easley, then chief of the Ohio Department of Health's Division of Dental Health, has observed, "conveys to the public that a legitimate scientific controversy exists." Doubtful or confused voters generally cast a "safe" ballot—against change, against fluoridation.

Upper-middle-class fluoride proponents also made a key strategic error when they tried to do something that almost always backfires in American politics: sneer at the opposition. That tactic won the antis not only sympathy, but also the "underdog" vote. Paul Thomp-

son's heated columns—he once called Dr. Yiamouyiannis a "roving, pseudo-scientific swami and hired gun"—probably helped the Ohio biochemist and his cause. Dr. Yiamouyiannis's ally, C. A. Stubbs, later claimed that each Thompson column produced a platoon of new "anti" volunteers.

Finally, the antifuoridationists won because many San Antonians, like many Americans elsewhere, distrust or resent governmental authority. To many residents, voting against fluoride, as county elections administrator Marco Gomez later noted, meant voting *for* "freedom of choice." Gomez summed up many voters' attitude toward the council: "How dare you [pass the fluoride ordinance] without letting the public speak?"

For all of these reasons, the seemingly quixotic antifuoride cause succeeded in San Antonio. (Indeed, of the roughly 2,000 referendums on fluoridating water that have been held in the United States since 1950, 60 percent have been won by the antis.)

Mrs. Hicks, Mrs. Walker, and Mr. Stubbs were elated by their upset victory. "This should send a great message to our political leaders," said C. A. Stubbs, "that it is not a right and proper thing to try to steamroller something over the people."

John Yiamouyiannis was so pleased on election night that he said he might run for mayor. But it was not to be. A few days later, San Antonio's newest resident abandoned his briefly adopted city and returned home to Delaware, Ohio, another place where the drinking water has yet to be fluoridated.