

Group calls on NIH to remove Harvard professor from fluoride-cancer study

The Fluoride Action Network (FAN), today urged that a Harvard Professor be removed from a research group studying the association between fluoride and osteosarcoma because his objectivity and ethics are disputed and he has ties to a company that profits from fluoride. FAN also urges other steps be taken to ensure this study meets the highest standards of scientific integrity.

In June, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) charged Chester Douglass, a professor at Harvard and editor of Colgate's oral health newsletter, with suppressing research linking fluoridation to osteosarcoma, a rare but frequently fatal form of bone cancer. (1) Douglass remains central to the ongoing project.

In a letter sent today to Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni, the Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), FAN requests that Douglass be replaced with a scientist who is independent of the fluoridation debate, and has no other conflict of interest. (2) FAN also requests the NIH make the data of the \$1.3 million taxpayer-funded study freely available for full independent review.

EWG recently issued an ethics complaint against Douglass for misrepresenting his doctoral student's successful dissertation linking fluoridation to osteosarcoma. (3)

Elise Bassin, Douglass' doctoral student, analyzed data collected from U.S. hospitals in the early 1990s by a team of scientists led by Douglass and funded by NIH. In her case-control study, Bassin found that males exposed to fluoridated water during their "mid-childhood growth spurt" (ages six to eight) had a significantly increased risk of later developing osteosarcoma. Bassin described the findings as "remarkably robust." (4)

Bassin's dissertation, completed in May 2001 but unpublished and unknown prior to FAN obtaining a copy earlier this year, was recently sent to several expert reviewers by a Wall Street Journal science writer. The reviewers found it to be of "publishable quality." The head of oral health at the CDC, and fluoridation supporter, William Maas said, "She did great shoe-leather epidemiology." (5) According to EWG, Bassin's work "is the most rigorous study of the link between bone cancer and fluoride in tap water ever conducted in the United States." (6)

Prior to the discovery of Bassin's results, the only information available on Douglass' research was a very brief summary published in 1995 in the Journal of Dental Research where Douglass reported no link between fluoridation and bone cancer. (7) Despite assurances by Douglass that a more comprehensive analysis of his data would be forthcoming, Douglass never published the study.

"It's been 10 years now, and Douglass has yet to publish the findings of his first study," says Paul Connett, PhD, Executive Director of FAN. "Now that we know what his data showed, Douglass' failure to disclose these findings is deeply troubling. It will simply not be possible for us or the general public to have confidence in any further work he produces on this matter."

Summarizing Connett says, "With lives at risk and the public's trust at stake, the NIH cannot afford anything less than to secure scrupulous scientific integrity on this study. We are asking that NIH do three things: 1) remove Douglass from the study; 2) demonstrate that none of the other study members has any other conflict of interest or ties to the government's fluoridation program, and, 3) make the data of the study, not just the conclusions, available for independent analysis and review."

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References:

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 - (3) [Environmental Working Group, "Harvard Fluoride Findings Misrepresented?" July 13, 2005.](#)
 - (4) [Bassin EB. \(2001\). Association Between Fluoride in Drinking Water During Growth and Development and the Incidence of Osteosarcoma for Children and Adolescents. Doctoral Thesis, Harvard School of Dental Medicine.](#)
 - (5) [Wall Street Journal, "Fluoridation, Cancer: Did Researchers Ask the Right Questions?", July 22, 2005.](#)
 - (6) <http://tinyurl.com/bg7ez>
 - (7) [Journal of Dental Research 1995; Volume 74, Page 98.](#)
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