MICHIGAN PREMIER PUBLIC HEALTH CONFERENCE 2026

A Trust Gap, Not a Knowledge Gap

What our neighbors actually told us about fluoride, and what we do next

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The New Dark Ages

Yeah can you hear the call in our rambling land susurrations,

That can expand beyond all hope of light and plunge us into unrelenting night

A pall on truth and reason,

It feels like hunting season

So avoid those lines of sight and we'll set this right

Welcome to the new dark ages

I hope you're living right

These are the new dark ages

And the world might end tonight

Now come ye children one and all - let's heed Ezekiel's call,

And bide until the word is good and ripe and get plucked clean out of sight and we'll set this right

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Now come ye children one and all - let's heed Ezekiel's call,

And bide until the word is good and ripe and get plucked clean out of sight

The world will be erased, our kin will be

Immaculate ejaculate in space

Before the kind of king's love, he'll snatch us

From above, brothers help me sing it

Welcome to the new dark ages

I hope you're living right

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And the world might end tonight

HOW THIS STARTED

It started as a class, not a research project.

- My first hybrid course. I wanted it to be more than recorded lectures and discussion boards.
- Students run a real evaluation, from the first question to the final report.
- A teaching project first. The research came with it.

PH 628

Program Evaluation in Public Health

My first hybrid course

Four reasons this became the project.

1

A dentist teaching public health

My public health students were getting very little oral health. This gave them more.

2

The topic of the moment

How does something this mild, used and studied by dentists for decades, come to be seen as harmful? And who are people listening to?

3

Grand Rapids

The first city in the world to fluoridate its water. When I was offered a position here, I remembered my first lesson on fluoride.

4

Why nursing

Nurses are the largest group of health care professionals, and patients get much of their health information from them.

“Can you hear the call in our rambling land susurrations…”

We are living through an age of manufactured doubt.

- Everyone does their “own research,” and the algorithm rewards outrage, not evidence.
- The tragedy travels; the quiet, effective thing (fluoride) doesn’t get clicks.
- So the only people talking about fluoride are the ones against it.

IT STARTED HERE

"...and we'll set this right"

Grand Rapids was the first city in the world to fluoridate its water.

January 25, 1945. Within a few years, this city's children had dramatically fewer cavities. One of the great public health victories of the century.

1945

first in the world

60%+

fewer cavities in the city's children

AND ALMOST AS FAST, THE ATTACKS ARRIVED

“It feels like hunting season”

The opposition never went away. It just kept changing costumes.

1950: Stevens Point, WI	The first organized defeat. The lesson opponents never forgot: you don’t win with better evidence, you win with a better story, and fear is always the better story.
1950s: the Cold War	Fluoride stopped being a dental treatment and became a “communist plot.” By 1964, Dr. Strangelove was joking about “precious bodily fluids,” and audiences recognized the guy.
At home	Grand Rapids’ own public health director said he was called a murderer and a communist, and got hate mail from nearly every city in the country. The birthplace of fluoridation, and its health director got death threats.

SAME MELODY, NEW LYRICS EVERY DECADE

“So how do you sleep
There’s nothing to keep”

And right now, the uncomfortable part: it is winning.

communist plot → **corporate cover-up** → **“chemicals in my water”** → **IQ / neurotoxicity (2026)**

2024

A federal court ordered the EPA to act on fluoride.

2025

Utah became the first state to ban it outright. Florida was the second within weeks.

Now

The U.S. Health & Human Services Secretary has called it worthless.

This is no longer a fringe forum at two in the morning. This is law.

SO WE ASKED A DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE QUESTION

In a place like this, what do people actually know about fluoride, and who do they trust to tell them?

Twelve students, from MPH, pre-dental, and nursing, did the real work, and we read the public-facing fluoride messaging to see what fills the silence when we aren’t talking.

123	36	9	5
survey responses	Kent County ZIP codes	in-depth interviews	languages

“So avoid those lines of sight…
let’s heed Ezekiel’s call”

Several places offered to host us.
Once we named the topic, every door closed.

What happened	So the students collected surveys and interviews in public places, wherever people were willing to stop and talk.
What it meant	The silence we set out to study, we met first in the fieldwork.

I EXPECTED HOSTILITY. HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND.

"Welcome to the new dark ages
I hope you're living right"

The relationship we keep insisting is broken is, for most people, quietly intact.

63.4%

believe community water fluoridation is safe

nearly two out of three

54.5%

name their dentist or doctor as their main source of fluoride information

more than half, the highest of any channel

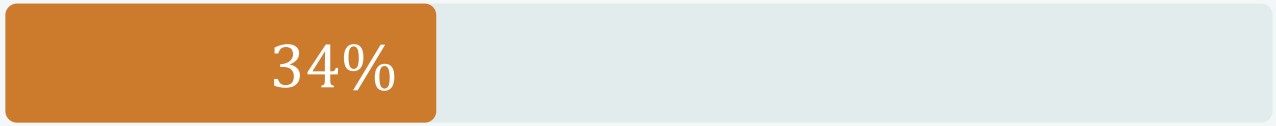
The credibility didn't evaporate. It relocated.

A national Annenberg Public Policy Center survey asked the whole country the same kind of question:

Trust the American Dental Association on fluoride



Trust the current HHS Secretary on fluoride



~1 in 3

of Americans neither favor nor oppose fluoridation.

Not against it, just un-landed. The void we found in 36 ZIP codes is a national one.

SO WHERE IS THE PROBLEM? THE NEXT NUMBER.

“That can expand beyond all hope of light and plunge us into unrelenting night”

35.8%

wanted any more information about fluoride at all

And not because they’d heard enough. Because they simply weren’t thinking about it.

The opposite of trust is not distrust.
The opposite of trust is absence.

A void never stays empty for long. When the only people talking about fluoride are the ones against it, silence isn’t neutral. It’s an open door. The misinformation doesn’t even have to be persuasive. It just has to be the only voice in the room.

THE INTERVIEWS TOLD THE SAME STORY FROM THE INSIDE

“Because we’re animals with golden rules”

Two things showed up in every single interview, skeptic and supporter alike, no exceptions.

Transparency

“Tell me the truth, plainly, and show me the trade-offs.”

Community dialogue

“Talk WITH me about this decision. Don’t lecture me after it.”

The pro-fluoride dentist and the anti-fluoride parent were, underneath it all, asking for the same thing: to be talked with instead of talked at.

THE ONE SENTENCE I'D LIKE YOU TO LEAVE WITH

"Who can't be moved by rational views"

The knowledge gap is real, but underneath it, and bigger than it, sits a trust gap.

The people who resist fluoride are not, at bottom, missing facts. They are missing someone to trust.

- You can't fact your way out of a relationship problem. Anyone who's argued with someone they love knows this.
- Skeptics framed fluoride as consent and bodily autonomy (who decides what goes in your body), not as science.
- The one currency everyone accepted was local, personal trust. Not the CDC. Not a study. A person they know.

Our single strongest argument never came up once, not from a single skeptic.

Fluoride protects most exactly the children whose families can't afford a dentist.

The equity case. The protection case. The case that should move anyone who cares about kids, and it is completely absent from the public conversation. We are holding the most morally clear story in all of public health, and we are not telling it.

SO WHAT DO WE DO? THREE MOVES, NONE IS A BETTER BROCHURE.

“And bide until the word is good and ripe”

1

Find the champions

Local, personal trust was the only currency everyone accepted. The messenger matters more than the message.

2

Fix the process, not the pamphlet

People are asking to be included in the decision, not lectured after it.

3

Lead with protection & equity

Tell the kids-who-can’t-afford-a-dentist story, and start the conversation before the next ballot, not after.

We’re very good at defending fluoride the week it’s under threat, and terrible at talking about it in the years no one is attacking it. That silence is where we lose the room.

“Now come ye children one and all,
let’s heed Ezekiel’s call”

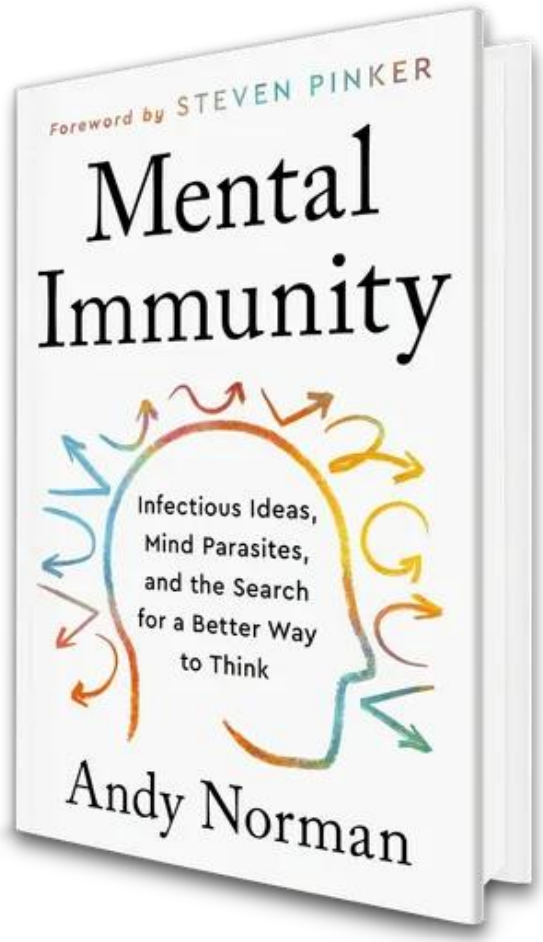
“They don’t know what they don’t know.”

The public doesn’t know what it doesn’t know about fluoride, not because people aren’t smart, but because no one whose job it is to know has bothered to tell them.

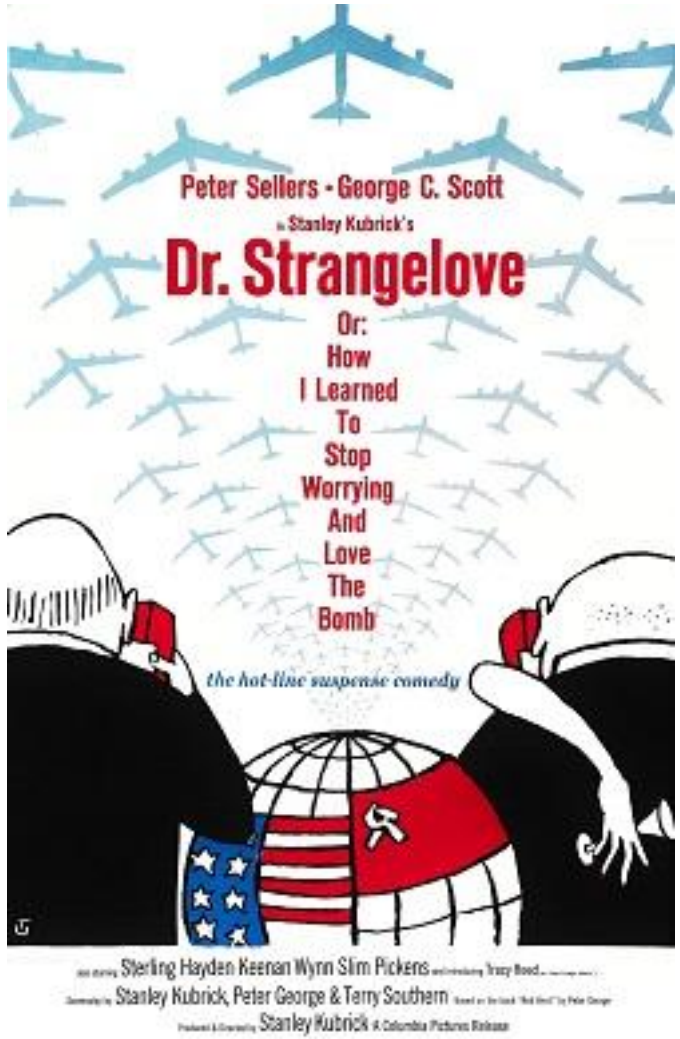
So who fills the silence: us, or the people shouting against it? They’ve already told us, survey after survey, whose voice they’d rather hear.

It’s ours. We just have to start using it.

The people of Kent County are not unreachable. They’re just unattended. Let’s go be the person they already know, and consider this presentation my candle.


Foreword by STEVEN PINKER
Mental Immunity
Infectious Ideas, Mind Parasites, and the Search for a Better Way to Think
Andy Norman


BAD RELIGION
NEW MAPS OF HELL


Peter Sellers · George C. Scott
in Stanley Kubrick's
Dr. Strangelove
Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb
the hot-line suspense comedy
Stanley Kubrick, Peter George & Terry Southern
Stanley Kubrick