A different view:

OPTIMAL INTAKE
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In response to the Editor's invitation (*Fluoride* 29 page 130 August 1996) to discuss the continuing use of the term “optimal intake of fluoride” I offer the following comments.

While agreeing that the effects of fluoride on dental caries are mostly topical we cannot dismiss altogether the small systemic effects on the morphology of teeth and on the fluoride concentrations of teeth, saliva and gingival fluid. It is often said, rightly, that caries is a multi-factorial disease and I would add that fluoride provides a multi-factorial way of reducing it. Fluoride toothpastes are now the main source of fluoride in many countries and their effect is mainly local, especially in adults who normally spit out the toothpastes and may follow by rinsing the mouth with water (thereby reducing the effect of the fluoride - see Chesters *et al*, *Caries Research* 26 299 1992). Drinks and even some fluoride-containing foods may have both topical effects (while eating and from residues left adhering to the teeth) and systemic effects (after swallowing).

I agree that “optimal intake” should refer only to systemic effects and this is not calculable being an unknown proportion of the total effects.

I agree with the guest editorial (Foulkes, *Fluoride* 29 129 1996) that the term “nutrient” is inappropriate for fluoride whose essentiality though sometimes suggested (Messer *et al*, *Science* 177 893 1972), has never been established. However, I must contest the description of fluoride in food by the derogatory word “contaminant”. Foods contain many substances that, like fluoride, seem not to be essential for life but which make useful contributions to health. Examples are the fibres of vegetables and the innumerable substances that give foods their flavours. The value of dietary fibre is well known and the flavours, by stimulating appetite and making eating pleasurable, contribute both to nutrient intake and general well-being.

I would suggest describing these many substances as “inessential food constituents with beneficial effects”.

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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

We are grateful to Professor Jenkins, a long-serving member of our Editorial Board and of our Society, for contributing to the above discussion. Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor, commenting on the varying views expressed in the above and earlier editorials.

Our XXIst Conference, held August 25-28 in Budapest, Hungary, was another memorable occasion in the history of our Society, and we are all grateful to our new President, Dr Miklós Bély, who organized it. It was decided to hold future conferences in Bellingham WA, USA, in 1998 and in Szczecin, Poland, in 2000. Further reports will appear in our next (February 1997) issue.

JC