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Terrence Jones

## Fluoride still controversial

Rack it up to inexperience due to term limits, a full moon or something in the water, but whatever the reason, this year's two sessions of the Louisiana Legislature could best be characterized as a collective shot in the foot. The abortive and much-hated pay raise, ethics legislation that appears to have backfired, most of the political sweetness in the appropriations bill gutted with the governor's poison pen line-item veto--what more could the Legislature and governor do to destroy public confidence? Just one word: fluoride.

Perhaps one of the most nonsensical but nevertheless contentious public health issues ever devised by man is the case for or against adding fluoride to public water supplies. Yet our lawmakers chose to pass legislation that our governor has signed into law dealing with this very issue. Legislative self-flagellation, Act 761 requires public water systems with at least 5,000 customers to fluoridate its water at state expense, unless a majority of the customers vote against it in an election.

Given the strong feelings both pro and con concerning fluoride, this should provide a constant source of entertainment at meetings of local government and in the press for years to come. For example, the Monroe City Council voted down fluoridation in February of 2002 after considerable acrimonious discussion that insulted the intelligence of almost everyone but the council members.

In the end, the Legislature will probably be painted as the villain for forcing upon the populace what many consider an intrusion upon personal freedom. Remember, this is a state that has revoked the motorcycle helmet law for the same reason--twice.

When I was a child, if I recall correctly, the John Birch Society campaigned against adding fluoride to drinking water, citing that 1) it was poisonous, 2) it robbed us of our "essential essence" and, of course, 3) it was a communist plot. The opponents of fluoride have

refined their arguments since then, but remain just as intractable.

The case for fluoride, however, has remained pretty much the same over the years. Here's what the American Dental Association (ADA) has to say:

"For over five decades, the American Dental Association has continuously endorsed the fluoridation of community water supplies and the use of fluoride-containing products as safe and effective measures for preventing tooth decay. Studies have shown that water fluoridation can reduce the amount of decay in children's teeth by as much as 60 percent.

"Over 405 million people in approximately 60 countries enjoy the benefits of optimally fluoridated water. In the United States, approximately 170 million people (about two-thirds of the population on public water systems) benefit from fluoridation. The average cost for a community to fluoridate its water is estimated to range from approximately \$0.62 a year per person in large communities to approximately \$3.90 a year per person in small communities (2004 dollars)."

Not only is your dentist in favor of fluoride, but also the U.S. Public Health Service, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the World Health Organization, and many other national and international organizations. It is interesting to note that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognized fluoridation of water as one of the 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

How could anyone be against this magic stuff? Bring on the nuts.

Although perhaps unfair to paint the anti-fluoride crowd with too wide a brush, I'll do it anyway: They appear to be the advocates of "alternative medicine" and believe that there is a vast conspiracy between doctors, dentists, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies and the U.S. government to deny them good health. Generally they advocate chiropractic medicine and products sold in health-food stores as well as patent medicines, "natural elixirs" and "natural healing" rather than established medical treatment.

Without apology, these folks are goofy when it comes to medicine. Although they no longer claim fluoride is a communist plot, they claim about every other evil derives from it, backed up by junk science. For example, they assert that the main fluoride chemical added to water (hydrofluorosilicic acid) is an industrial byproduct from the phosphate fertilizer industry.

They maintain that unlike the fluoride used in toothpaste, hydrofluorosilicic acid is not pharmaceutical-grade quality. It is an unpurified, industrial-grade, corrosive acid which has been linked, in several recent studies, to increased levels of lead in children's blood, bone fracture, bone cancer, joint pain, skin rash, reduced thyroid activity, and IQ deficits. In short, just about everything but rectal itch.

Fluorosis, the staining of children's teeth from coming in contact with too much fluoride, is one of their claims that have some basis in fact.

The ADA cautions against using fluoridated water in baby formula and small children swallowing fluoridated toothpaste. But this risk is tiny compared to the good fluoride can do for children. What critics fail to reveal is that fluorosis, when it occurs, is usually associated with naturally occurring fluoride, such as that found in some well water, mainly in the Southwest.

The anti-fluoride lobby is so anti-fluoride that they advocate avoiding ingesting anything that contains the chemical. Here's a list of things they recommend you stay away from: fluoridated toothpaste, soda, juices and other processed beverages, green or black tea, mechanically de-

boned chicken (McNuggets), some medicine like Cipro and even Teflon coated pans. Good Lord! Based upon this, I should have died years ago!

Our family moved to Louisiana from Minnesota almost 30 years ago. The first time my wife took our three small sons to the dentist, he took one look in their mouths and commented, "I can tell these children have been drinking fluoridated water. Their teeth are beautiful."

There was not one cavity. That's all the endorsement I need for fluoridated water.

It's OK to chastise your legislator for trying to give him or herself a huge salary increase, but support them for a courageous vote for fluoride.

Peace!