

9-12-08 Dental Decisions

While sitting in the dentist's chair the other day, I remarked that it must be rewarding to be a dentist these days compared to when I was a child. At nine or ten years old, I thought I was bringing home a good dental report card when I could say, "I had only three cavities." It was rare to know someone with a cavity-free mouth. So, I was thinking, that it must be nice to work on cosmetic features rather than drilling and filling. To my surprise the dentist responded, "Oh, no, cavities are back." (Did I see him quickly smile?) You know that I had to ask why. He continued, "because of all the bottled water. No one is drinking tap water."

With that revelation, I now was more opposed to bottled water than ever. We fill up our landfills with plastic, we expend a lot of energy to recycle some of that plastic. We pay a lot of money to buy plastic bottles filled with ... with what? It is usually labeled in tiny letters as "pws". That stands for Public Water Supply. Yup. It is treated and tested tap water. It is not required to have fluoride added to it, however.

Just last week, a woman called the board of health office asking if the town water contained fluoride. She was new to the town and had children. Not being a resident of Halifax and being accustomed my own supply of water via my well in Plympton, I thought I'd better ask others. Some were quite certain that the addition of fluoride was required by law. I was not so certain. I had read the Water Department's Water Quality Confidence Reports and did not recall anything about fluoride. I told the woman that fluoride is naturally occurring and while the town water probably had some, I didn't think it was added. I referred her to the water department and suggested she speak to her pediatrician.

As a young mother in Quincy, my children drank and brushed their teeth with fluoride every day, as the city water supply was supplemented with the mineralizing substance. My pediatrician always asked about it and then prescribed vitamins without the supplement, as too much can cause unsightly markings on the teeth. As with so many chemicals, moderation and control were essential. I wondered how we were supposed to control the amount if we did not know how much was in what we ate, drank, swallowed and brushed with. The young mother who called was doing the right thing by asking and being aware.

When the idea of adding fluoride to public water supplies was first proposed several decades ago, it was met with vehement opposition. As a young child I recall my parents and aunts claiming that not only was this substance found in rat poison, the very idea of forcing programs on us was akin to communism. They asked rhetorically yet passionately, "How dare THEY take away our right to decide for ourselves?"

Time brought scientific evidence to the fore and with it, a turning of the tide of opposition. People were convinced that dental caries were a widespread national health problem that could easily and affordably be reversed by the addition of fluoride to our water. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had identified fluoridation of drinking water as one of 10 great achievements in public health during the 20th century.

The fluoridated waters health promotion program could be compared to our century old program using store bought table salt as the delivery vehicle. Fortifying salt with iodine was an easy way to help people produce enough thyroid hormones, thus

eliminating the once common unsightly throat goiters and providing the necessary chemistry for a fetus's developing brain. Pregnant women were told, "Make sure your salt is iodized." What a brilliant and accomplished program! Can the same be said of the well-intentioned attempt to fortify our water with fluoride? Should our bottled water be similarly fortified?

Those questions bring me back to those claims heard in my childhood. To have the ability to control and decide for our selves is just as critical to our health as it is to our citizenship. If we ingest too much fluoride, we risk kidney damage and stained teeth. If we don't get enough in our diet, we miss out on the small amount necessary for our teeth to form strong mineral coatings, thus reducing our chances of bacteria holding cavities. All the more important it is to read labels, ask these questions of our physicians and our State's Public Health Department.

Even when the resources are there, it is not an easy task. It is a complicated world and over time, we tend to take things for granted and stop reading labels. It helps to think of it as fun research rather than an overwhelming obligation. As my Aunt Dorothy used to say, "We can always learn. We can read and research wherever we are. Why, all we have to do is turn around that can of dog food and read the ingredients and ask questions. Then seek the answers!"

One of the answers my father arrived at was, "Be true to your teeth or they will be false to you!" That is good advice that will never change. We can apply it by keeping in touch with the definition of "being true".

Speaking of true, I wish Winnie a truly wonderful and amazing 103rd birthday!

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