H2O: Oral Health Opportunity

Delta Dental Supports Use of Fluoride in Community Water & Toothpaste for the Benefit of Public Oral Health

Denver, Colo. (March 2, 2012) – In 1931, Dr. Frederick McKay concluded his 30-year investigation into why some children in Colorado had brown stained teeth but very little tooth decay. He discovered that water supplies with high levels of fluoride – a water-born mineral found in rocks and soil – caused the discoloration of tooth enamel and prevented tooth decay. However exciting that moment of eureka must have been for Dr. McKay, it’s doubtful he ever imagined that adding fluoride to drinking water would eventually be named “one of 10 great public health achievements of the 20th century” by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

During National Public Oral Health Week, Delta Dental of Colorado encourages community leaders to support the fluoridation of their local water systems. Dr. McKay’s discovery was a boon for preventive health. It’s one of the easiest, most reliable ways to bolster the oral health of an entire community. Research studies have demonstrated how fluoride helps strengthen tooth enamel and remineralize teeth that have already been damaged by the early effects of tooth decay.

Although most community water supplies had naturally-occurring fluoride in their water, it was usually at too low a level to help prevent tooth decay, and sometimes at such a high level that it would damage the tooth surface and cause staining and pitting. It took scientists almost two decades after McKay’s discovery to determine the right balance between decay prevention and tooth staining. In 1945, Grand Rapids, Mich., became the first U.S. city to add fluoride to their water supply to prevent tooth decay in the population. The results were so dramatic – a sixty percent drop in tooth decay rates in the children – that other communities began adopting the practice. Today, almost 75 percent of the U.S. population using public water systems – nearly 200 million people – has access to fluoridated water.

Fluoride has not been without its detractors, however, as some people object to any additives to drinking water even when the effects are beneficial. Others proclaim that fluoride has harmful effects, although a large body of scientific studies over the years has not supported those concerns. It is widely known that fluoride can protect teeth across an entire lifetime. The brown staining noticed by McKay, now called severe fluorosis, only occurs when the teeth are developing below the gumline during early childhood. That is why early researchers looked for the proper balance of fluoride to put in water that would both help prevent tooth decay and eliminate risk for severe fluorosis among
Fluoride was so successful in water that researchers began to look for other ways to get fluoride to the teeth. In the 1950s, fluoride toothpaste was introduced and today, nearly every toothpaste brand on the market contains fluoride as its primary active ingredient. This one-two preventive punch has been the greatest contributor to an amazing improvement in oral health for Americans over the past 60 years.

With the economy struggling, many communities are unable or unwilling to fund community water fluoridation projects. In response, several Delta Dental member companies have helped provide funding for community fluoridation projects. It’s an important dental initiative that Delta Dental is proud to support in the interest of improving public oral health.

“Our mission at Delta Dental is to advance oral care for everyone not only through our dental benefits programs but also through significant philanthropic efforts,” said Dr. Bill Kohn, DDS, vice president of dental science and policy for DDPA. “We strive to understand the unique oral health challenges and needs of the communities we serve. Community water fluoridation projects are so vital to a community’s oral health that we think these are a natural outlet for our philanthropic resources.”

About Delta Dental of Colorado
Delta Dental of Colorado is the state’s leading dental insurance carrier, offering the largest provider network, deep member discounts and a 95% customer satisfaction rate. A not-for-profit organization, our mission is to improve the oral health of the communities we serve. We’re doing just that by providing affordable dental insurance coverage to more than a million members. Delta Dental of Colorado is a member of Delta Dental Plans Association (DDPA). Find out more: http://www.deltadentalco.com

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