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From the Oregonian...

More than just a pretty smile

Only the rich or uninformed could love Oregon's record of ignoring fluoride and let teeth rot where they may

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Nielsen: One dollar spent on fluoride saves \$38 in treatment

Rich people with beautiful teeth may have no idea what I'm talking about. Their teeth are private treasures, to be whitened like fine cotton and tended like box hedges. Their smiles aren't a matter of public health, but of personal pride.

They can be forgiven for shrugging off Oregon's high tooth-decay rate and the endless fringe campaign to keep fluoride out of drinking water. They've never blanched at an unaffordable dental bill. They've never spent weeks steering cold drinks to one side of their mouth, waiting to see the dentist.

They've certainly never sent their kids to a free clinic. They bought fluoride supplements for their lovely children, and they can't imagine a dental problem too big to prevent or pay for.

The toothsome rich can be forgiven for their ignorance.

No one else can.

Not the activists who try to protect us from fluoride, and definitely not state lawmakers, who've helped maintain Oregon's status as a fluoridation backwater with the cavities to prove it.

"Oregon has been very slow," says Gordon Empey, the state's chief dental officer. "There must be a reason, but I'd hate to guess what it is."

Fluoride, for those of you who napped through chemistry, is the ionic version of the element fluorine, and it exists naturally in the earth's crust and oceans. Some communities have natural concentrations of fluoride in their drinking water, while others have none.

More than 60 years ago, scientists noticed that people who drank water with fluoride in it were far less likely to get rotten teeth. This sparked a national fluoridation movement that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention named one of the top 10 public-health achievements of the 20th century, along with the polio vaccine.

Oddly, Oregon didn't bite.

Close to 80 percent of Oregon's 3.7 million residents still lack fluoridated water, a worse track record than every state except Hawaii and Utah. While people in Coos Bay, Corvallis, Sublimity, Beaverton and a few dozen other towns enjoy the benefits of fluoridation, the vast majority of Oregonians aren't so lucky -- including residents of Portland, Hillsboro, Gresham and Eugene.

In cities that are part of regional water systems, it's hard to make a local decision to fluoridate. Activists on the far left and right crush any attempts at progress statewide.

Both ways, ordinary Oregonians pay the price.

They pay for extra dental work and extra prevention. They pay higher taxes to cover the dental work of poor people. They pay in hours wasted in the dental chair, loathing those inspirational posters with kittens and sailboats.

It would be so much cheaper to fluoridate the water. Every dollar spent on fluoridation saves \$38 in dental treatment, according to the American Dental Association.

It would be more socially equitable, too. While fluoridation helps everyone, it offers the greatest benefit to those with the least access to dental care -- including low-income children, elderly and disabled people, working-poor families and those living in rural areas.

Little of this may matter to those who can afford to pamper their teeth. And none of it arouses the sympathies of the activists circling Salem and preparing to destroy the latest fluoridation bill.

They'll say fluoridation is bad for salmon. (Well, yes, if you force-feed the fish a toxic dose.) They'll say some studies suggest links between fluoride and scary diseases. (True. If you spend enough time on Google, you can find a "study" to feed any fear.)

Worse, some opponents will mix truth with well-meaning snobbery: Children, they'll say, should eat less sugar and corn syrup, and adults should improve their lifestyles. Then we wouldn't need fluoridation, see?

Again, so true.

If poor people snacked on \$5 pints of organic strawberries and swore off 59-cent bags of gas-station candy, they'd have less decay. If rural people moved to cities with more dentists, they'd have more frequent checkups. If old people rose from their chairs and got better dentistry, they'd have movie-star teeth, too.

If everyone carried a silver toothbrush in their mouth, we wouldn't need public health at all. It's hard to believe that 60 years of ignorance about fluoride could hold so much water.

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