



**OPINION** February 19, 2016

**I Support Community Water Fluoridation**

– Harry Chen, MD, Commissioner of Health

Fluoridation has a 70-year track record of reducing dental decay and cavities by as much as 25 percent among both children and adults. Doctors and dentists of my generation have witnessed the improvement in oral health for whole communities when fluoride is added to drinking water systems. Today, we recognize the relationship between healthy teeth and overall health: infection and inflammation in the mouth is associated with diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and complications of pregnancy.

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that works to strengthen tooth enamel. It is not a drug, and it is not a by-product of the fertilizer industry as some opponents claim. Community drinking water systems in Vermont can adjust the amount of fluoride in drinking water to a level that is most beneficial for preventing tooth decay – 0.70 parts per million. It is the frequent and consistent contact with this low level of fluoride that strengthens teeth. Adding fluoride to drinking water is much like fortifying milk with Vitamin D, adding iodine to table salt, or folic acid to breads and cereals to prevent diseases caused by a lack of these nutrients. Nearly all developed countries practice fluoridation by adding fluoride to drinking water systems as in Great Britain, Spain and other countries, or adding fluoride to table salt when fluoridation of water is impractical, as in Germany, France and Switzerland.

Fluoridation benefits everyone in the community. Tooth decay is one of the most common chronic diseases in children, and periodontal (gum) disease affects far too many older adults. Clinical studies have proven that fluoridation protects teeth, for everyone, not just those well off enough to have regular preventive dental care. Vermont data show that compared to higher income school-age children, children of lower income families have a significantly higher prevalence of tooth decay. This means these children are starting off with a health disadvantage – but fluoridation can help. We also know that tooth decay is not just a health concern, but also a social barrier to economic security.

The best available science, thoroughly reviewed by scientific and public health experts, continues to tell us that fluoridation is safe. According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: "No convincing scientific evidence has been found linking community water fluoridation with any potential adverse health effect or systemic disorder such as an increased risk for cancer, Down syndrome, heart disease, osteoporosis and bone

fracture, immune disorders, low intelligence, renal disorders, Alzheimers disease, or allergic reactions."

To further investigate some of these latest claims, the National Toxicology Program at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences recently announced plans to conduct animal studies to determine whether fluoride, at the concentration added to drinking water, is associated with adverse cognitive effects The Health Department will continue to review and critically evaluate the validity of any new studies or published reports concerning fluoridation and health.

The role that fluoridation has played in improving health is why the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention has called it one of the 10 greatest public health achievements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And for this reason, I stand in support of fluoridation with the Vermont Department of Health and nearly every public health, medical and dental organization, including the U.S. Public Health Service, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Dental Society, and the World Health Organization. It's what I'd want for myself, and for my family and my community.