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What's on Tap for Oral Health

Oral health can only benefit from the region's new fluoridation levels, say School of Dentistry faculty who helped spearhead the effort.

Los Angeles—On October 28, 2007, the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) increased its fluoridation levels to be on par with the majority of the country's water supply. The move is considered both a victory for oral health advocates who understand fluoride's important role in maintaining good dental health, and a triumph for USC School of Dentistry faculty who have lobbied for more than a decade on the issue.

The MWD increased its fluoride levels from 0.1-0.4 parts per million to 0.7-0.8 parts per million, a level that both the California Department of Public Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend for optimal dental health.

Eugene Sekiguchi, USC School of Dentistry associate dean for International, Professional and Legislative Affairs, was part of the statewide alliance of oral health experts who lobbied state and local legislators to increase fluoridation levels of municipal water supplies. Other members of the coalition included USC School of Dentistry Dean Harold Slavkin, faculty members Charlie Goldstein and Stanley Heifetz, and Tim Collins, dental director for the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services.

"This is a tremendous achievement and one that will significantly impact many regional municipalities," Sekiguchi says. "It was a long time coming."

Heifetz, a clinical professor in the school's Division of Health Promotion, Disease Prevention and Epidemiology and resident expert on fluoridation practices, says California lagged far behind the rest of the nation in fluoridation of public water. In 2000, the CDC reported that less than 29 percent of the state's population received fluoridated water. Only five other states had lower percentage numbers.

"California was pretty close to the bottom of the list when it came to fluoridation," Heifetz says.

The MWD, a cooperation of 26 cities and water agencies in Southern California, supplies water to 18 million people in six counties from Santa Barbara to San Diego. "This represents a sizeable increase," Heifetz says. "We will definitely see a profound improvement in oral health in our communities."

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that helps teeth resist decay by strengthening the protective layer of tooth enamel. It can also reverse newly formed cavities.

Its health benefits have been touted since the 1940s when the first communities began fluoridating their drinking water, says Dean Harold Slavkin. Data suggests that fluoridation can reduce decay by 30 percent, he says. In areas with no ready access to other sources of fluoride, reductions in tooth decay can be as high as 60 percent.

“In Los Angeles County, we have several million people without access to routine dental care, especially in the vulnerable populations of children and the elderly,” he says. “Fluoridation of drinking water can improve the quality of life of more than half a million people just in Los Angeles County alone.”

State legislators passed a bill in 1995 to fluoridate all of the state’s water, says Slavkin, “but without any financial support.” When First 5 LA—a California initiative that funds services directed at children—approved a \$20 million grant to water boards and municipalities to upgrade their fluoridation processes, it was the boon fluoridation advocates were seeking.

“Like immunizations against infectious diseases, fluoridation is an inexpensive and highly effective adjunct to reduce the prevalence of tooth decay,” Slavkin adds.

The MWD estimates that the cost to increase fluoridation levels will amount to less than one dollar per family per year. But Sekiguchi says that could translate into much more saved in avoided costly dental services.

“For every dollar spent in fluoridation, we’re talking about \$38 dollars saved in dental bills,” he says. “Few public health measures have such a favorable cost-benefit ratio. And in the end, we’re saving teeth and improving our region’s oral health.”