

# Island fluoridation is essential

**Tooth-decay rates in Hawaii are embarrassingly high. The solution is painless, inexpensive and safe.**

If we are not successful in moving the fluoridation bill forward this legislative session, I can assure you we will be back next session. The health of all of Hawaii's residents — and especially the health of our keiki — is at stake.

It is difficult to believe that such a basic and preventable public health problem — tooth decay — is so rampant in our advanced and health-conscious state and we just accept it. Our tooth-decay rates in Hawaii are embarrassingly high compared to the rest of the country. In fact, our kids have twice as many cavities as other kids in the nation.

Tens of thousands of kids and adults have cavities every year that could be prevented. Department of Health research estimates that children in Hawaii between the ages of 5 and 9 have experienced over 385,000 decayed teeth at a treatment cost of over \$19 million. Children in this age group represent only a fraction of our population who experience similarly high decay rates and treatment expenses.

Tooth decay can cause severe pain and suffering for children, adults and seniors alike. And, if left untreated, it leads to other, more serious health problems.

Fortunately, there is a painless, inexpensive and safe solution. Community water fluoridation can help to ensure good dental health for all its residents.

Adding the essential trace element fluoride to community drinking water to help ensure proper develop-

## ISLAND VOICES

**DR. BRUCE ANDERSON**

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ment of teeth and bones and prevent tooth decay is a proven public health practice that's been used successfully in the United States for more than 55 years.

Community water fluoridation has been shown to safely prevent up to 70 percent of dental cavities. It does this by hardening teeth from the inside, preventing cavities and tooth decay that topical applications cannot prevent. There are other ways to take fluoride, in pills, for example, but none are as effective as adding it to water.

Adding fluoride to community water also makes good dental health affordable and accessible for everyone. This is particularly important here in Hawaii, where tooth decay strikes economically disadvantaged communities — as well as native Hawaiian, Samoans and Pacific Islanders — especially hard.

Every major health organization — including the American Dental Association, the American Medical Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Cancer Institute, the Food and Drug Administration, the American Nurses Association and the World Health Organization — has endorsed com-

munity water fluoridation as safe and effective.

Over 60 percent of the rest of the nation uses fluoridated water, and with impressive results. Here in Hawaii, the water on our military bases has been fluoridated since the 1950s, and the level of tooth decay among these residents is, on the average, 50 percent less than the rest of the state.

Given the tremendous success of this proven and cost-effective public health measure throughout the rest of the world, why has Hawaii fallen so far behind? How is it possible that we, who live in the "Health State," continue to suffer from tooth decay that can easily be prevented? I believe the answer to this comes down to misinformation. Fluoride is safe for people. Half a century of extensive research in communities throughout the country has shown no association between fluoridation and any adverse health effects.

Fluoride is safe for the environment. Low levels of fluoride already naturally exist in drinking water in Hawaii. Boosting the level of fluoride to the level where it can help fight tooth decay — typically one part per million in water — will have no environmental impact on our water quality.

Fluoride is cost-effective. For every dollar we invest in Hawaii's community water fluoridation, we will save \$80 in dental treatment costs.

Hawaii needs fluoridated water now. We remain convinced that once the facts about fluoridation are understood, the public mandate for fluoridating Hawaii's community water will be heard loud and clear.