

AS I SEE IT WALTER EISENHAUER

## Fluoridation would benefit rural Pennsylvanians

**A**s the Pennsylvania General Assembly takes up legislation to require fluoride in water supplies, state lawmakers need to consider the health benefits of fluoride for rural Pennsylvanians who are in need of basic oral health services.

Rural communities face many hurdles in ensuring its residents have access to dental health services. A 2003 study showed that only 51 percent of rural children receive dental services regularly, compared to 61 percent of urban children. Nearly 32 percent of rural adults have untreated tooth decay compared to 25 percent of urban adults. And nearly twice as many rural adults, ages 45-64, than urban adults have lost their teeth due to oral health problems.

The U.S. Surgeon General in 2004 noted that "fluoridation is the single most effective public health measure to prevent tooth decay and improve oral health over a lifetime, for both children and adults."

The Pennsylvania Rural Health Association believes that supplying fluoridated water to as many rural Pennsylvanians as possible would help improve the oral health and lives of those residents. Scientific studies over the past 60 years show that optimal levels of fluoride in drinking water can re-

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duce tooth decay by 20 to 40 percent in people of all ages. Those same studies have shown that fluoride is a safe and effective method for improving oral health.

House Bill 1649, sponsored by state Rep. Stephen Barrar, R-Delaware, would require water companies serving 500 or more customers to add fluoride to the water as a proven method of reducing tooth decay. PRHA supports this measure and urges state lawmakers pass the bill into law. If that happens, Pennsylvania would join 11 other states that mandate fluoridation for water supplies.

Rural residents face different challenges than urban residents in keeping their teeth and gums healthy. Many have to travel greater distances to see a dentist and may lack access to public transportation. More rural residents are self-employed or work

for small companies than urban residents, increasing the likelihood that they have no private dental insurance. In fact, one study showed that 72 percent of rural elderly lacked dental insurance compared to 66 percent of urban elderly.

There is also a shortage of dentists practicing in rural areas. Many health organizations, including the Pennsylvania Dental Association, are working on this problem. For example, the association is seeking larger loan forgiveness grants for dentists who agree to work in underserved areas.

**FLUORIDATION OF** water supplies will not help all rural citizens. Many rural residents are not connected to water systems and rely on wells for their drinking water. PRHA urges residents with wells to consult a dentist on fluoride supplements, which are often administered in a dentist's office and help prevent tooth decay.

PRHA will continue its efforts to improve the health of rural Pennsylvanians. Meanwhile, the General Assembly can take a big step in improving the oral health of rural and urban residents.

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