

UF dentist helps solve fluoride fight in Eustis

By April Frawley Birdwell

James Rotella never wanted to be known as an anti-fluoridation crusader. He never even thought much about the fluoride added to his town's water until a few of his patients asked him about it earlier this year.

"I didn't want to create any fears in the community," said Rotella, a podiatrist and city commissioner in Eustis. "I just wanted to have a thoughtful discussion."

But when he publicly questioned whether Eustis should continue adding fluoride to its water, something the city has done for 20 years, he inadvertently stepped into a hornet's nest of controversy that has raged since the first drop of fluoride was added to a Michigan community's water 60 years ago.

Years of research have shown that fluoride prevents cavities. Experts tout the practice of adding fluoride to public water as one of the greatest health achievements of modern time. Yet fervent activists still protest it, claiming fluoride causes everything from cancer to low IQ, links experts say are unsubstantiated.

That's why when seeds of an impending fluoride debate were sown in Eustis, Scott Tomar, D.M.D., Dr.PH., a UF associate professor of dentistry in the division of public health services and research, spoke to the Eustis City Commission in May to defend a policy he believes saves teeth and money.

"It's probably the most well-researched public health measure in history," Tomar said. "It benefits virtually everybody."

Fluoridation, dental experts say, fights tooth decay, the condition that accounts for most of the country's dental costs. Fluoride is added to 67 percent of water in the country, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention actually has mentioned plans to increase that figure by 2010.

Fluoride reduces demineralization — when acids from bacteria in dental

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plaque dissolve needed minerals from tooth enamel — and works best if it is already in the mouth when these acids are produced, Tomar said. This makes fluoridated water ideal for cavity fighting, because drinking water and foods processed in fluoridated communities will provide low yet constant levels of fluoride throughout the day.

Before the first community fluoridated its water in 1945, nearly everyone



PHOTO BY LISA BAIDZER

Dr. Scott Tomar, an associate professor of dentistry, spoke to the Eustis City Commission in May to support water fluoridation, a public health measure he says saves teeth and money. Commissioners voted to continue adding fluoride to the city's water after listening to Tomar and other dentists.

experienced tooth decay, said Howard Pollick, a University of California at San Francisco dental professor.

Things are better 60 years later, but tooth decay is still a problem, and for some people among lower socioeconomic levels, fluoridated water is the best dental care they receive, Pollick said.

But a quick Internet search yields more than a dozen Web sites devoted to stopping water fluoridation. Most of these sites, like The Fluoride Action Network, link to research that claims fluoride causes cancer and other diseases. Most of these articles, however, are not from peer-reviewed scientific journals, a standard for accepted and credible research today, Tomar said.

Other groups have different reasons for opposing fluoridation, like not wanting government to add anything to water or not trusting "the so-called experts," Pollick said.

"Ever since someone proclaimed the earth is round, there have been people opposed to it and there still are, even to this day," Pollick said.

Rotella voted to keep fluoridation in Eustis after listening to dentists during the May meeting, but he is skeptical.

"There are a lot of unknowns," he said. "We thought drugs like Vioxx were safe ... Is it possible that one day we're going to wake up to find (fluoride) is not safe?"

Fluoride does have one side effect. Too much of it can cause white flecks or stains to appear on teeth, called fluorosis. But this is merely cosmetic, Tomar said, and more noticeable types of fluorosis usually occur when children swallow too much fluoridated toothpaste, which has a much higher concentration of fluoride than drinking water.

But there's no credible research linking fluoride to other diseases or health problems, Tomar said.

"At those levels, it's just been found time and again to be safe," he said. "So the health concerns, I think, are not really concerns. Which is why water fluoridation remains strongly endorsed." **P**