

FLUORIDE POISONING

FLUORIDE, TOOTHPASTE AND THE A-BOMB

Gar Smith

*Pollution, Pollution,
You can use the latest toothpaste
And then wash out your mouth
With industrial waste.*

WHEN HARVARD professor and humorist Tom Lehrer penned those lines in 1965, he probably had no idea that a major ingredient in "the latest toothpaste" was industrial waste. Fluoride toothpastes contain something called sodium monofluorophosphate, which is a cousin to some potent nerve agents once considered for chemical warfare. Fluorosilicic acid, which is used to treat 90% of municipal water supplies, is a "pollution/concentrate" captured by the scrubbers at fertilizer plants.

For years, many scientists and dentists have called for banning fluoride in toothpaste and drinking water. Finally, on January 7, the US Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) responded. Citing an epidemic of tooth-staining dental fluorosis that now affects an estimated 41% of American children from ages 12 to 15, the DHHS recommended cutting the maximum allowable fluoride in water nearly in half from 1.2 parts per million to 0.7 ppm.

This shouldn't have taken so long. In 1991, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) added a warning to toothpaste tubes: "Do not swallow. Use only a pea-sized amount for children under six." Anything beyond that and parents were instructed to "contact your local Poison Control Center." Since that pea-sized lump can contain 1,000 ppm of fluoride, manufacturers should have made toothpaste taste like medicine. Instead, they promoted kid-sized tubes that tasted like strawberries.

But at least with toothpaste you can control your exposure to fluoride - or even choose to avoid it. Not so when the chemical arrives in your tap water, a situation facing two-thirds of US homes. Proponents claim fluoridation is "safe and effective," but evidence places both claims in doubt. Moreover, critics contend that fluoridation violates standard medical practice: Instead of prescribing individual doses, mass-medication exposes everyone— young, old, healthy, and sick to one collective dosage.

When you think of it, swallowing fluoridated water to protect your teeth makes about as much sense as drinking shampoo to make your hair shine. (Using similar logic, Novartis recently encouraged people to treat toe fungus by swallowing Lamisil tablets. It turned out the pills were also damaging kidneys.)

The DHHS announcement marked the first major setback for fluoridation since the 1.2ppm level was proposed in 1962. Announcing the news, few reporters could resist mentioning the scene in *Dr Strangelove* where Col Jack D Ripper calls fluoridation a Communist plot to steal "our precious bodily fluids." This scene rankles former BBC reporter Christopher Bryson. According to Bryson, Ripper was based on a real Pentagon officer who traveled the United States lecturing on the evils of fluoride as part of a covert plan to paint fluoride critics as wing nuts.

While poring over once-secret documents for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Bryson and medical writer Joel Griffiths discovered how fluoride's promotion as a "decay fighter" was linked to the earliest days of the Pentagon's atomic weapons program. When the *Monitor* elected not to publish their findings, Griffiths and Bryson brought the story to *Earth Island Journal*. The subsequent cover story, "Behind the Fluoridation of America: DuPont, the Pentagon and the A-Bomb" (EIJ, Winter 1997-98), was a Project Censored Award-winner.

Here's the story again, in brief: The Pentagon's bomb-makers needed fluorine to produce uranium hexafluoride. In 1946, an accident at a secret DuPont-run weapons plant in Deepwater, New Jersey, prompted a lawsuit by owners of contaminated farmland. To counter the lawsuit (and protect its secret bomb program), the Pentagon conspired to redefine fluoride emissions as "benign." Formerly classified documents revealed that the idea to "counteract the local fear of fluoride ... through lectures on ... the usefulness of F in tooth health" originated with Harold C Hodge, a fluoride toxicologist with the Manhattan Project. (For the complete tale, see Bryson's book, "*The Fluoride Deception*.")

It has taken nearly a half-century to cut fluoridation levels by half. But critics note the new standard remains a mere "recommendation" unless approved by the EPA's Office of Drinking Water. Even then, the new standard still would expose 1 in 200 US kids to dental fluorosis. And there are other risks: The National Research Council has linked fluoride exposure to bone fractures and crippling *skeletal fluorosis*, which is commonly misdiagnosed as *arthritis*.

In the aftermath of the DHHS's landmark ruling, Paul Connect, director of the Fluoride Action Network and author of the new book, "The Case Against Fluoride", is hopeful that fluoride's days are numbered. "Now we can concentrate on getting the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) water division to do an honest job," he says.

And also there arises a possibility to retire the nuclear weapons that fluorides made possible. □□□

—*Third World Network Features*