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OUR VIEW



Dental problems persist for many of city's children

Sixteen months after Bellingham voters mistakenly voted not to fluoridate their water supply, no one has come forward with a comprehensive plan to help the hundreds of Bellingham children with rampant tooth decay.

We are reminded of this issue by the recent successful free clinic provided by caring dentists.

More than 100 children from low-income families attended "Free Sealant Day" at Interfaith Community Health Clinic. At the clinic, children received free or low-cost dental care and their parents learned whether their families qualified for low-income assistance programs.

Putting sealants on teeth helps ward off cavities. We salute the clinic and the dentists for helping so many children at one time.

Unfortunately, what the dentists find at these free clinics is not good. At the 2006 free clinic, dentists treated 82 children with 143 cavities, including 13 kids with rampant decay, meaning they had cavities in seven or more teeth.

That figure is no surprise, considering earlier reports that showed about 25 percent of Bellingham third-graders had rampant tooth decay. And a one-day clinic is not solving this significant problem in our community.

In the days leading up to the vote rejecting fluoridation, anti-fluoride activists talked a lot about new programs they would like to see created to help fight tooth decay. Individual action, not mass fluoridation, was the answer, they said.

But rampant tooth decay rates continue. It is not sensationalizing the problem to say it is a crisis. For many low-income families struggling to pay for housing and food, dental treatments are just too expensive.

Imagine, if you can, the pain of being an 8-year-old with seven painful cavities in your mouth. And cavities aren't just a toothache issue. Studies show that bacteria growing in cavities can cause many other health problems, including higher chances of getting heart disease and diabetes and of having premature births in teenage girls.

We hope somewhere in our town the people who organized so admirably to oppose fluoridation are ready to get together again to try and take some positive action for Bellingham's children. There was so much energy given to stopping a potential solution. But 16 months later there seems to be little energy from citizens to try to solve a real problem.

Bellingham needs a system to help stop the rampant tooth decay in its children, particularly its most vulnerable, at-risk children. The easy answer would have been fluoridation. Without fluoride, citizens should be pushing local government to offer more dental programs or financially support dental programs like those at Interfaith.

Bellingham's kids deserve better than they are getting.