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Times editorials

Price of fluoride foolery

They started lining up shortly after sunrise in the county that rejected science and removed fluoride from the drinking water. By midmorning, the Pinellas County Health Department was jammed with families waiting for free dental exams for their children that could include cleanings, X-rays, fillings - and fluoride treatments. These are the voices that four county commissioners ignored when they voted against public health.

Those who drove or took the bus to the sparkling office on Ulmerton Road last week had little money. Some earned too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford dental care for their kids. Others were unemployed or military veterans. Many were aware that four county commissioners - Neil Brickfield, Nancy Bostock, John Morroni and Norm Roche - had voted to stop putting fluoride in the drinking water this year. They did not understand why their elected officials would jeopardize their children's health.

Althina Ford of St. Petersburg brought her two grandchildren, ages 9 and 10, and waited for their turn. "Fluoride is good for you," she said. "If it's good for you, they should keep it in. If they take something that's good for you away, they shouldn't be elected."

Margarita Marian of Seminole struggled to keep track of her six children as she waited for them to see the dentists. "Fluoride. They're supposed to leave it there," she said, adding she would never vote for a politician who removed it from the drinking water. "Fluoride is better for kids."

Julie Opsahl of Clearwater was waiting with about 50 other families when the doors opened at 8 a.m. She was still waiting three hours later for her number to be called for her 9-year-old and 15-month-old sons. The family has no health insurance, and the unemployed teacher said she now gives fluoride drops to her youngest son at the suggestion of her pediatrician. "I know it's important for kids to have," she said, "so I have to add it now."

This is the irony of the Fluoride Four's foolish decision. They saved the county \$205,000 by no longer adding fluoride to the drinking water.

But taxpayers will spend roughly \$27,000 on free dental care for 267 children who showed up last week, including the cost of fluoride treatments. And that's just the start.

Pinellas County employs nine full-time and seven part-time dentists. Last year, the health department helped 12,356 patients with 113,524 various dental services. Aside from the annual free care days, children whose families are on Medicaid pay no charge; fees for other children are on a sliding scale based on income. Without fluoride in the drinking water, the county health department's dentists will only get busier.

"I thought it was a terrible decision," said Christina Vongsyprasom, dental services manager for the health department. "We will see over time more children with dental caries (cavities), absolutely."

Dr. Stacey Golden, who oversaw the health department's free clinic event, said the controversy over fluoride has heightened public awareness about dental health. She said roughly nine of 10 families who seek dental care for their children at the health department want the fluoride treatment. Yet the Fluoride Four caved in to pressure from vocal tea party supporters and antifluoride activists who misrepresented the science.

No wonder two of the antifluoride commissioners who are seeking re-election this fall don't want to talk about it. At a recent Suncoast Tiger Bay Club forum, Bostock and Brickfield deflected questions about their votes to take fluoride out of the water. Instead of dismissing the issue as old news, they should read the memo on the county health department's website: "Water fluoridation continues to be the most cost-effective, practical and safe means for reducing and controlling the occurrence of tooth decay."

Bostock and Brickfield also should listen to the county's own dentists. They should explain how it makes sense to take fluoride out of the drinking water and then spend even more public money on dental care for poor kids, including fluoride treatments. And they should visit the county health department and talk to the parents who know what's right even if their elected officials don't.