

Urgent need for fluoride action

The last thing I want to do is cause offence to Tril Sutherland, the 95-year-old former dental nurse who spoke up about the state of kids' teeth, but has never heard of "the murder house."

Sorry Tril, but the term was universal in Taranaki when I was a kid. Nobody was actually killed in the little clinic building at Fitzroy School, but some nearly died of fright, I can tell you.

Many carried into older age the experience of pain and whirring noises produced by drill bits on the swinging arms of machines out of H G Wells' War of the Worlds. One I know still pleads with the dentist to get injections in as soon as possible.

In those days, the only numbing agents were one or two of the teachers. There was no laughing gas as the dental nurse approached with a hand-piece big enough to break concrete, her foot pumping at a pedal drive. You can imagine the effect if her foot slowed mid-molar.

They tried to distract us with tiny balls of mercury in little flat plastic trays; we could roll it around, but who knows where it ended up. Did it have the deadly properties associated with mercury today?

There was a lot of work to do on my mouth. I had a sweet tooth and spent my half-crown pocket money at Mrs Bull's dairy in Rimu St, driving her nuts with tedious selections of aniseed balls, jaffas, smokers, pineapple lumps and jet planes. Early arithmetic lessons.

My teeth were shot by the time my free dental care ran out at 18. I was going to dentist Ken Tompkins, who gave up trying to fix pegs that were more black and silver filling than tooth, and started pulling them out.

Ken was a responsible fellow, so I'm sure he didn't bury the teeth behind his surgery in Devon St, like the 1950s Invercargill practitioner whose 1000 or more discards were dug up by builders last week (below).



One of the best things Ken did was father a son my age, Bruce, who took over his dad's practice just as my tooth crisis reached its climax. Bruce was in my class at New Plymouth Boys High School and emerged from dental school with the latest ideas, one of which was to stop yanking teeth and apply modern dentistry to save them.

When I moved to Auckland, the project was taken over by Eddie Alcock, who continued Bruce's miracle work. He implanted four crowns in the centre of my smile space, courtesy of ACC after I walked into a door. Ed guaranteed his work for 25 years, but did such a great job the crowns are still going after 40.

Aside from great dentists, I had other significant input – fluoride in the city water supplies here and in Auckland.

Ken and Bruce both provided technical advice when in the late 60s one of my earliest newspaper feature stories was about fluoride, urging the city council to add it to our water. It made so much sense at the time that councillors readily agreed.

It was only much later, earlier this century, that anti-vaxers frightened a majority of New Plymouth councillors into removing fluoridation.

We haven't had it since, even though government ministries haven't wavered in their agreement with world health authorities that fluoride is not a medicine and can be safely included in town supplies to the significant benefit of kids, whose exposure to excessive sugar is now even worse than in my day.

Previous governments have ducked the controversy by leaving the decision on fluoridation to local councils, whose elected members are not equipped to make such scientific decisions. New Plymouth's were not the only ones around the country to cave to hysteria.

Now, the government wants district health boards to make the decision, but the shift has been delayed indefinitely by an anti-fluoridation group's deep pockets, which funded a legal test case to block South Taranaki District Council from extending fluoridation to Patea.

That battle was won in the Supreme Court last year in favour of fluoridation, but the health boards can't assume responsibility until the government passes enabling law. STDC isn't waiting - Patea gets fluoride soon.

The fluoridation bill languishes on the parliamentary order paper because coalition partner NZ First wants the topic polled first. Dear Winston: our kids' teeth are rotting. Want that on your conscience?

Write him a terse letter, Tril.