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HUME

Away with the trade: Belgium prohibits - as the first country in the world - fluoride supplements

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Fluoride tablets, fluoride drops and fluoride chewing gum, for decades promoted as the crown jewels of dentistry, are going to be taken off the market because they are poisonous and pose a great risk for physical and psychological health. This has been decided by the Federal Minister of Public Health Magda Aelvoet. As soon as the royal decision is published in the government's "Staatsblad", the prohibition will become valid. Thus Belgium becomes the first country in the world to prohibit fluoride supplements.

In a report from 1999 UNICEF complained that certain governments knew insufficiently how poisonous fluoride is - especially for children, as their young organism absorbs more fluoride than an adults'. In the same year HUMO wrote a dossier about the dangers of fluoride (Humo Nr.17/33059, April 20, 1999). We got a lot of reaction at the time, particularly from dentists who, though undoubtedly with good faith, echoed the arguments of fluoride proponents. Then it became quiet around this question again.

But the usefulness of fluoride has been doubted worldwide for a long time already. Over the years at least 12 Nobel Prize winners in Medicine and Chemistry have warned of the associated health risks. To make children take fluoride is not only useless against caries, it is plainly dangerous. Tooth and bone decalcification as a result of fluoride even has a name - fluorosis . Fluoride is very reactive and it goes deep into the bones and cells where it is accumulated. Yes, the tooth surface becomes much harder, but the tooth itself becomes more brittle. From a lot of research it seems that fluoride causes joint problems, skeletal deformations, osteoporosis, and that it can even cause bone cancer. Also the brain cannot escape from it. Fluoride has a negative influence on the nervous system and the immune system, and in children it can lead to (chronic) fatigue, a lower IQ, learning disabilities, lethargy and depression.

GONE & RICH

Sodium fluoride, which is used in the so-called food supplements, is 80 times more poisonous than the naturally occurring calcium fluoride, with which it is often confused even by medical professionals. And - not unimportantly - it is a poisonous waste product of the aluminum and artificial fertilizer industry. Multinationals, like Exxon, US Steel and Alcoa, can get rid of their waste totally legally, and they even get rich from it. Especially in the US does the fluoride lobby everything to add more fluoride to the drinking water. And who has President Bush named as Minister of Finance? Paul O'Neill, head of Alcoa, the biggest aluminum producer in the world.

The industry will follow with argus-eyes what the effects will be of the decision by the Belgian Green Minister. Aelvoet has proposed to the European Commission to prohibit fluoride supplements in all of the European Union, but the Commission thought it was a bit too early: the ban was put on the slow track in expectation that the issue would be "harmonized". Thus for now Belgium is on its own, but experience teaches that if one of the members prohibits a dangerous material, the rest of Europe reluctantly follows suit.

Nevertheless, the industry can still get rid of its toxic garbage: fluoride toothpaste, fluoride mouthrinse, fluoride floss, and even toothpicks with fluoride are not under the scope of the ban. And the dentists are still allowed to smear fluoride onto the teeth of children - how risky this is. The American researcher Dr. Phyllis Mullenix has demonstrated that the same treatment in test animals causes the fluoride levels in the bloodstream to rise to such a degree that the animals within the hour displayed behaviour disturbances. On top of this, there exist all kinds of dental filling materials with fluoride which continuously leaches into the mouth. Dentists use such materials to fill cavities in children's teeth. It is a hallucinatory practice when you know that fluoride is only slightly less toxic than arsenic.

Although the ban on fluoride supplements is only a first step, it is however a brave decision, and Aelvoet can expect without doubt a lot of wind from the opposite direction in the next few days, in and out of the country.

BELGIUM HEALTH MINISTER AELVOET:

"Naturally in those sort of issues harmonizing within the European Union is desirable, but I cannot always wait until the European Union is this far. The High Committee of Health has advised me to prohibit fluoride supplements and I can do nothing else than be content with the scientific arguments with which this advice is backed up. We're going to tell our decision officially to the other European members in the hopes that they will follow us quickly. For years I have been worried about the signals from the scientific world which warned of fluoride use. I have never given fluoride to my own children."

HUMO:

"In the meantime, the majority of the Flemish people have swallowed fluoride on a daily basis, and on medical advice to boot. And there are few children who do not know the famous white tablets."

AELVOET:

"Once a habit is firmly entrenched and it has a so-called scientific basis, and industry has an associated concern, which in this issue is clearly the case, then it often takes a lot of time, a lot of arguments, and a lot of incentive to turn the tide. Earlier, the tobacco industry also had scientific arguments which made it appear that smoking wasn't harmful."

HUMO:

"To make children swallow fluoride, no matter what the source, is a medical mistake of great magnitude, as it is completely useless against caries."

AELVOET:

"That fluoride prevents cavities has, in the meantime, been contradicted, yes."

HUMO:

"You cannot blame the fluoride industry for not being creative: the market is swamped with fluoride gels, fluoride mouth rinses, fluoride whiteners, fluoride floss, and even fluoride toothpicks."

AELVOET:

(surprised) "What? Toothpicks with fluoride? Do they exist as well? Within the limited scope that Europe gives me, I want to end this kind of fluoride use. We will contact the other European members to broaden the base."

HUMO:

"Professor Dirk Vanden Berghe, microbiologist at the Antwerp University UIA, has for decades been an opponent to fluoride. He asks: 'And what will the ministry do about fluoride toothpaste? Children often swallow 30 to 40 per cent of the paste or they get it through the saliva. In this way they often have an overdose of fluoride.'"

AELVOET:

"My administration will ask the manufacturers to make toothpaste fluoride-free. But we cannot force them into this. The problem is that toothpaste doesn't fall under food laws, but is regulated under the cosmetics act, which is regulated by Europe. There is a lot of work to do still."

HUMO:

"There is more. There exist all kinds of dental filling materials which consistently leach fluoride. These are used officially to fill cavities in children's teeth. One cannot estimate what a child like that absorbs of this poison from the saliva."

FRANS GOSSELINCKX (Cabinet Advisor, Pharmacist)

"The prohibition of the fluoride supplements is a sign of things to come. The model 'fluoride helps against tooth decay' is still in the head of nearly all the dentists. We have to start to break this model. They have now received the first signal from the Minister. Besides, we have only recently learned that these filling materials exist. I am sure that my colleagues in the other member states don't know this yet."

AELVOET:

"Then it is high time that we take this on as well. I will take it on at the European level. We have to turn the tide. It will take time but we are going to return fluoride to where it came from."

POISON FOR THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

HUMO:

"We cite again Professor Dirk Vanden Berghe: 'Now that we are this far that the fluoride supplements will go, the big responsibility is with doctors themselves. We

have so many new chronic conditions which are consistently rising in numbers. There are enough studies which make a direct link with fluoride use. The dentists have to warn the parents of their patients that it is careless to use fluoride, no matter what the method. One child will have symptoms of fluoride poisoning early, while in others the bad effects will only show at a later age."

AELVOET:

"It is only logical that we will inform the medical community about the risks of fluoride."

HUMO:

"You have prohibited the use of fluoride supplements, but the pharmacists are allowed to sell them as long as their supply lasts. How do you explain that?"

AELVOET:

"The transition period is not meant to appease the pharmacists here. In my other responsibilities - environment and agriculture, we work this way. For example, if we ban a pesticide then we always have a transition period to make the resistance not so big. When we issue a very innovative regulation, as now with fluoride, then the people need time to adapt themselves. At the moment everybody thinks that fluoride is not harmful. Fluoride is a slithering poison, it also slowly creeps into the brain."

GOSSELINCKX:

"As soon as the news appears and the prohibition becomes valid, then the Algemeine Farmaceutische Bond will call us with the question: 'What is all this?' It will be terrible, but in cases like this, the pharmacists themselves will often take the initiative to return the stock, out of fear that they will get stuck with it."

HUMO:

"Professor Vanden Berghe also warns of the new generation toothpastes which contain strontium. Also risk material, he says."

AELVOET:

"It's always the same. They want to sell things we can do without, just like we can do without a toothache (laughs)."

HUMO:

"Do you think this will be get straightened out in Europe?"

AELVOET:

"The European regulatories are composed entirely different than in the past. Let's be honest: if it is about what comes first, the health or the economy, then I am afraid we will no longer have a great majority. It will not be easy, but it doesn't mean that we can't start it."

GOSSELINCKX:

"We have to keep going until we are fluoride-free."

AELVOET:

"Precisely. And in that context I want to give HUMO a compliment: you have played an important role with the 'fluoride dossier' from a few years ago."

