

THE LAUGH'S ON U.S.

FREEZE! DROP THE TOOTHBRUSH. STEP AWAY FROM THE SINK.

by Sheldon Richman

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Your teeth will be set a-chattering next time you read a toothpaste tube. You might see this: "Keep out of the reach of children under six years of age. If you accidentally swallow more than used for brushing, seek professional assistance or contact a Poison Control Center immediately." (*Federal Register*, vol. 61, no. 195, October 7, 1996, p. 52287)

The new warning won't be on just any toothpaste. It will be found only on toothpaste with . . . fluoride.

Let us pause so that can sink in. If your child (or is it you?) swallows too much fluoride toothpaste, panic. Then seek "professional assistance." I think they mean "doctor." Don't call your golf pro.

How much is too much? "More than used for brushing." That's close enough for government work.

Before we get accused of alarmism, let us note for the record that fluoride toothpaste already has a warning label. It reads: "Don't swallow. Use only a pea-sized amount for children under six."

The Food and Drug Administration has only added the business about poison control. Nothing to be concerned about.

At least, that's what an FDA spokeswoman told me. Had any new information about fluoride prompted the latest warning? The spokeswoman said no: "The purpose was to clarify the existing warning," she said.

I started to wonder if those concerned citizens who have been warning about a communist fluoride plot for decades had seized

the FDA. They were always dismissed as kooks. But now the FDA says fluoride is poison.

I can imagine the scene in 1996. FDA chairman David Kessler, puffing on his pipe, is making notes about regulating nicotine. In bursts a cadre of masked, fatigue-clad anti-fluoridationists, pointing assault rifles (whatever they are). "What is the meaning of this?" a startled Kessler asks, his last smoke ring dissipating over his head.

"We are members of The Great-Great-Great-Etc. Grandchildren of the American Revolution," responds the group leader. "You will do what we say. By the way, don't you know that tobacco is bad for you?"

"Pipes don't count. Didn't you see my interview with David Brinkley?" says Kessler. "What do you want?"

"We order you to issue a warning about fluoride," the leader responds. "It should say: 'Fluoride is un-American.'"

"That's ridiculous. Fluoride won't hurt you. It's been in the water for years," says Kessler. The leader puts a gun to his head, prompting Kessler to add, "Okay, how about this? 'If you accidentally swallow more than used for brushing, contact a Poison Control Center immediately.'"

"We'll take it."

Since that transcript appeared in neither the *Washington Post* nor the *New York Times*, I'm pretty sure I made it up. But things could have happened that way. I don't know how else to explain it.

I wondered how the FDA proposed to put the warning on tap water.

But the spokeswoman said that

was the Environmental Protection Agency's bailiwick. The EPA said its standard of up to 4 mg of fluoride per liter of water has been found "appropriate." So swallow all the water you want, except when you're brushing your teeth.

BY THE WAY . . .

OSHA is; ergo, it regulates. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration wants to set ergonomic standards for the American workplace to minimize injury from repetitive motion. I really do appreciate OSHA's concern for my risk of carpal tunnel syndrome. (Which reminds me, has New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani gotten credit for eradicating Lincoln Tunnel syndrome, that pain caused by annoying squeegee guys?)

But considering that many injuries occur at home, is that the best use of OSHA's time? It should be working on these disorders:

Remote-Control Thumb Fatigue:

Surely the industry can come up with a new design so we can channel-surf in comfort. If the companies won't do it voluntarily, I say mandate it!

Taking-Out-the-Trash Wrist Torque:

Frequent carrying of trash cans may result in a painful twisting of the wrist. I suggest that the government provide each household with a little motorized cart for getting trash out to the curb.

Those are just some ideas for making the home safer. Next should be a national campaign against Couch-Potato Lumbago.