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## **Fernando J. Indacochea** **5 things we can do: W.Va. does not have to be a 'state of decay'**

*Oral health is one of the most pressing health issues affecting the children of our state. West Virginia ranks dead LAST in the nation. Poor oral health has long-term repercussions in the physical and mental health of our children, the future of our state. This in turn affects the productivity and well-being of all West Virginians. We will eventually pay a huge financial price if we do not tackle the root causes early and aggressively.*

*This problem is difficult to solve, but by no means an impossible task. We simply need to confront the forces that benefit from the status quo. This problem should not be an issue just for the dental community. Pediatricians, family practitioners, school authorities, legislators, government agencies and others play a vital role. We have an opportunity to make an early difference on these children before the severe problems arise.*

*The reasons for such a predicament are not a mystery.*

*s The access to dental care is limited in West Virginia. In some areas this is due to a shortage of dental professionals. In others, Medicaid reimbursement rates are too low, limiting or completely excluding this high-risk population. And yet, in others, the barrier is caused by the lack of interest or skill by dental practitioners to interact with infants and young toddlers. It is not surprising then that a large number of children fail to start school having the benefit of a dental examination, let alone having a dental home by the first birthday as is currently recommended.*

*s The culture of sweetened fluid consumption, including juices, is a major issue. This behavior is pervasively entrenched in the community. This is compounded by heavy advertisement in the media, and the promotion and/or condoning of these practices by some governmental organizations. As an example, the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program currently offers juice allotments for infants from the age of 4 months and promotes it as a "healthy" beverage. Even some pediatricians and other physicians promote juice consumption during infancy without clear evidence of any benefit from this practice. No other industrialized country promotes such practice to my knowledge. Fortunately, following the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations and policies, the new WIC food package for infants is being reformulated without juice.*

*Another example is that many schools still peddle sweet beverages to their students in order to obtain discretionary funds. By modeling this practice, our educational system contradicts itself with its message of healthy nutritional habits.*

*Soft drinks should not be offered to students for the same reasons that we do not sell cigarettes or alcohol to them to raise funds. A soft drink bill is pending in the Legislature at this point and would prohibit the sale of soft drinks statewide during school hours. Twenty-five counties have already taken that initiative and have eliminated the sale of soft drinks in those hours. Now, I know perfectly well that the beverage industry will fight any restrictions furiously; our children's oral health is not their concern, profits are. We need to support this bill and defeat the resistance from the beverage industry and some school authorities.*

*The culture of grazing on fiber-poor, carbohydrate-laden snacks has a similar effect on dental health.*

*s The poor dental health of mothers is a cause. Sugar is the fuel for germs, but cavities are infections of the teeth. Infections are transmissible. By covering and*

*promoting oral health in mothers, we will remove a source of contagion to their children.*

*s The lack of fluoride in the water systems of certain communities is problematic. More importantly, the low rates of fluoride varnishing are caused by a lack of access to dental care and the barriers for other health care professionals to perform such a simple preventive action. Any trained primary care provider (supervised if necessary) should be able to perform and be appropriately reimbursed for this very important intervention.*

*s We must step up our efforts to promote brushing after each meal and discourage the use of bottles beyond the first birthday.*

*Many of these issues are being addressed by the Legislature in the current session. It would be important to see the outcome of the political process. Our legislators have a huge opportunity to make a significant impact on our children's oral health.*

*As Rudolph Virchow, the eminent 19th-century German physician, once said: "Politics is nothing but medicine on a large scale."*

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