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Times editorials

Straying from facts on fluoride

It's hard to defend the indefensible when the facts are not on your side. Pinellas County Commissioner Neil Brickfield makes several inaccurate statements as he tries to justify why he voted to stop adding fluoride to the county's drinking water. Brickfield misrepresents established science, and he misleads voters in the same fashion he was misled before voting against the public health.

In a candidate forum Monday night in East Lake and at a Tampa Bay Times editorial board meeting Thursday, Brickfield cited positions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and area dentists to defend his vote. But he misstated the position of the CDC and the mainstream scientific community on fluoride:

- Brickfield says the CDC's position is that fluoridated water should not be given to infants. "That's not true," said Linda Orgain, a spokeswoman for the CDC's Division of Oral Health. In fact, the CDC specifically advises that fluoridated water can be used to prepare infant formula. If that is all the formula the child drinks, it says there may be a chance of mild dental fluorosis - usually barely recognizable flecks on teeth - and that parents can use low-fluoride bottled water some of the time if that concerns them.

- Brickfield says the CDC recommends that children under 8 should not drink fluoridated water or that it should be limited. "That's totally not true," Orgain said. The CDC says those children should not drink water that has high concentrations of fluoride,

which naturally occurs in some regions of the country - but not in this area. Pinellas water was fluoridated at a far lower level before the practice was stopped in January.

- Brickfield says he was told by dentists that residents can get up to four times the recommended daily fluoride from other sources, so there is no need to fluoridate drinking water. That stretches the imagination. The CDC estimates that 75 percent of an individual's fluoride intake can come from water and beverages such as soda and fruit, and the recommended levels of fluoride in drinking water account for fluoride from other sources. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services proposes setting the recommended level of fluoride in drinking water at the low end of a range, given the common use of other sources such as fluoride toothpaste. Pinellas was already near the low end of the scale, so the change would be minimal. Fluoridated water still can result in a 25 percent reduction in tooth decay.

Even when presented the facts, Brickfield declined to change his position on fluoride and instead criticized the county's dentists for failing to see enough patients on Medicaid. Pinellas does need more dentists who will accept Medicaid patients, but that only strengthens the argument for fluoridated water to combat tooth decay. Brickfield and fellow Commissioner Nancy Bostock are on the November ballot and are half of the Fluoride Four, who prevailed in a 4-3 vote to stop fluoridating the water for Pinellas' 700,000 customers. It only takes one vote of the commission to start repairing the county's reputation as a place where science and the public health don't matter. Until then, Brickfield could at least stop misrepresenting the facts on fluoride.