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***Is giving parents chewing gum the best way to save their kid's teeth?***

**EXCLUSIVE**

*By John McCann*

PARENTS in Glasgow could be given free chewing gum to protect their children's teeth in a bid to end a health "disaster".

Dental director Bob Broadfoot wants the city to introduce schemes to prevent children getting tooth decay instead of treating them once their teeth are rotten.

New figures show 64% of Glasgow pupils have at least one decayed tooth. But it is nearly 80% in the most deprived areas.

Dr Broadfoot said: "We have a public health disaster.

"More than half of Glasgow schoolchildren suffer from a preventable disease that can have fatal consequences or cause a lot of suffering."

Dr Broadfoot, dental director of the city's Primary Care Trust, said it had to take a medical approach, improving health, instead of a surgical one - removing or repairing teeth.

He said: "We do too much drilling and filling. We need to look more at prevention."

Tooth decay happens when bacteria, called streptococcus mutans, reaches high levels.

Babies are not born with it, but it can be passed on by contact including kissing and parents sucking a baby's "dummy" before putting it in the child's mouth, on shared cups or cutlery and even on toys.

But if parents chew gum containing artificial sweetener **xylitol**, the level of the bug in their mouths is reduced, preventing the bug being passed on and lowering the likelihood of decay in their children.

Dr Broadfoot wants parents to get free gum.

He said: "I don't know what it would cost, but it would be very effective."

The suggestion is included in Glasgow's recommendations to a national debate on children's teeth.

Dr Broadfoot is also recommending a scheme used in Swedish town Varmland, which cut the average number of rotten teeth among 12-year-olds from 6.5 to just one.

Health authorities offer advice on tooth brushing and a healthy diet when a baby's teeth first start to appear.

When children are five, the fissures in the surface of their teeth are sealed by dentists to prevent cavities and, when they are 12, their teeth are coated with a protective fluoride varnish to toughen and protect them. Dr Broadfoot said Glasgow does not have to wait for a national scheme.

He said: "I've spoken to chief executive Tom Divers at the health board and he acknowledges dental health has been neglected.

Dr Broadfoot was persuaded by the Primary Care Trust management team to include fluoride in water as one recommendation to the Scottish Executive.

But he admitted it would be unlikely to gain approval in the face of massive public opposition.

He said: "I don't want fluoride to hog the debate.

"There is a lot more we can do that is proven to be effective. I think we should be looking at the Swedish model.

"It may be more expensive but, if it's accepted and it works, then it's worth it."

A health board spokeswoman said: "Any such recommendation we receive will be considered by the board in due course."

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