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Another Voice: A game-changer for dental health of children of New York

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Dental decay is the most common chronic condition among children, yet it is almost entirely preventable. Still, far too many children in New York, especially those in low-income, rural, and underserved communities, struggle to access basic preventive dental care.

It doesn't have to be this way.

New York's leaders have an opportunity to change that: empower parents to apply fluoride varnish to their children's teeth under the supervision of a licensed health care provider.

Fluoride varnish is a safe, low-cost preventive treatment that takes less than two minutes to apply. It doesn't require special equipment and can be done with minimal instruction. When applied every three months, clinical studies show that fluoride varnish significantly reduces cavities in children.

Pediatricians and dentists overwhelmingly support its use. Medicaid and commercial insurers cover it as a standard of care.



Dr. Gale Burstein is the health commissioner of Erie County.

Derek Gee, News File Photo

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Despite this, many families struggle to get it. Limited appointment availability, long travel distances, lack of transportation, and a shortage of pediatric dental providers, especially those who accept Medicaid insurance, all make it difficult for families to keep up with regular preventive visits.

The children most at risk of dental decay are often the least likely to receive care. In 2020, only about one-third of New York children enrolled in Medicaid received a preventive dental visit – well below the national average.

The fluoride varnish legislation, sponsored by Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes and already passed by the Senate, would allow parents and legal guardians to apply fluoride varnish to their child's teeth, following a prescription and protocols from a licensed provider. The bill is currently under consideration in the Assembly.

The legislation builds on recent progress to increase access to fluoride varnish. In 2024, New York expanded the list of professionals authorized to apply fluoride varnish to include licensed practical nurses and dental assistants. Now, we can take the next step by giving parents the ability to help protect their children's health directly.

This legislation is especially important to parents in Buffalo, whose children are catching up on the cavity prevention offered by fluoride. This legislation will help bridge the gap while also helping children in surrounding rural areas on well water.

By allowing supervised parent application of fluoride varnish, New York can take a simple, cost-effective step to close this care gap. New York's leaders must use their time in Albany to pass this legislation and help more of our children grow up healthy and smiling.

Dr. Gale Burstein is the health commissioner of Erie County.