

### Environmental Tokenism

There was a recent "Leader" article on recycling your toothbrush handles. As a dentist with a bit of time on my hands, I did the math. While we recommend replacing your brush every 3 months, the only people who actually *do* this are those with periodontal disease. They get their teeth cleaned 4 times a year, and a free toothbrush comes as part of the deal. The average person replaces the brush every 6 months, which means a 6-pack of Preserve Toothbrushes lasts them 3 years. If the Preserve brush is typical, it weighs about 15 grams, so in 30 years, 60 brushes amounts to 900 grams of plastic kept out of the landfill. Converting this into carbon emission equivalents, that's about the same weight of CO<sub>2</sub> that goes into the atmosphere when you burn 13 ounces of gasoline. (A gallon of gas emits roughly 8.8 kg of CO<sub>2</sub>.) That's enough gas to drive your 55 mpg Prius about 5 miles. However, that's ignoring the energy costs of recycling the toothbrush plastic; it has to be mailed back, melted down, purified, probably have some chemicals added, and then manufactured into something else. I doubt anyone has done those calculations, but suffice it to say, you're not going to be able to drive your Prius the full 5 miles guilt-free. And that was from *30 years* of toothbrush handles. Obviously, you'd be better off to just drive the Prius ½ mile less per year. Or you could buy regular toothbrushes, donate a couple bucks a year to JLT, and be more productive.

But, I hear you say, the little things add up. Actually, they don't, at least not to anything significant. Small *percentages* of the total can add up to something, but not small things themselves. If you unplug your TV and DVD to save a few watts of energy, that's maybe \$10 a year of electricity. If your electricity bill is \$2000/year, that's 0.5% which is less than the annual rate of population growth. Even if the whole world had as much electronic crap as we do and unplugs it, it'd never be more than 0.5%. And, unlike population growth, that was a one-time saving. Now, if you cut 1% off your total earth footprint by electricity savings, 3% more by driving less, and 2% by buying fewer electronic toys, that's 6%, which is a significant decrease. Unfortunately, since population keeps growing, you'll need find new things to cut in a few years to just break even. That's a problem--meaningful savings require ongoing lifestyle changes, which not everyone is willing to make.

So should you spend the extra money to buy Preserve brushes? As a dentist, I would say no. Current thinking (which changes every 2-3 years) is that you should be using a Sonicare-type electric brush, no toothpaste, changing the brush heads every 3 months, and finishing with a fluoride rinse. The electric brush heads aren't recyclable, but weigh only 5 g. If this causes you too much guilt, donate a few bucks to an environmental cause--or do something that *does* make a difference, like living in a smaller house, driving your car less, or skipping that flight to warmer climes in the winter. A 15 gram reduction in the landfill isn't worth crowing about.