

History was made this week, and if you didn't notice it, you might be considered a little out of touch. There was an announcement that united millions of people around the globe in unrestrained emotion and sent journalists scurrying to report the news. Twitter and Facebook were buzzing with breathless chatter, with many experts offering their reactions and analysis, trying to put the news in its proper context. I am referring, of course, to the announcement that the Rolling Stones will host a series of concerts to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary next month.

The band's official website is selling tickets for the shows in London for \$650. A ticket broker website has premium seats available for nearly \$20,000 – so if the band plays 20 songs, that's a nice round \$1,000 per song...a slight uptick from an iTunes download charge. And consider this: there will be no shortage of people willing to pay for those tickets.

Meanwhile, the combined box office take at American movie theaters last weekend was \$130 million. And each year, America alone spends about \$18 billion – yes, *BILLION* – on coffee.

I know, I hear you: What's my point? Well, my point is that despite what you may hear to the contrary, it appears we have plenty of money to spend on the things we really want. Through this lens, it's fairly easy to identify our values as a nation. Just look around. What are our priorities? What are the things we really, really want? Do we want to be a nation of people who happily scarf down double-bacon-cheeseburgers and sip decaf cappuccinos while kids not very far away go to sleep hungry?

And it's true that kids in need aren't very far away. If any one of us saw a child on our street writhing in agony from rotting teeth, we'd of course want to bring that child to a dentist right away and provide whatever comfort possible. Yet plenty of children are in that situation in North Carolina right now – we just don't see them because most often, we're not on the right street.

In a few of our state's counties – such as Duplin and Robeson – almost two-thirds of kindergarten children have decayed, missing, or filled teeth. These are children about five years old, who have probably had teeth only for a couple of years – and they've already started to rot.

An annual report card issued by the PEW Center in 2011 graded North Carolina with a D for our state dental policies affecting kids. When speaking with PEW about this, they told us we should hope for an F in their next report – because it generally takes a failing grade to inspire any real action.

What does that say about us?

Young kids with serious tooth decay often end up being treated in the operating room, under sedation, in hospitals throughout North Carolina. Mission Hospital in Asheville treats about 1,000 kids a year like this; these are young, poor children, some with as many as 13 cavities, some who have already had teeth pulled, some needing full mouth extractions. What's worse, there's a 7-month waiting list for kids who need this care. The same thing is happening at UNC and Duke and other hospitals across the state.

And if you're thinking to yourself: "I don't know any kids who have cavities," the sad truth is, as with many other chronic diseases, all of what we call the social determinants of health –

race, income, parental education and employment, insurance status – all of the “usual suspects” increase the likelihood of severe decay. Even for North Carolinians with the ability to pay for care, geography plays a part. In four counties in our state, there is no dentist at all. How often do we think the children living in those counties get to see a dentist?

To solve some of these structural problems will require ramping up education and job creation on an order of millions. A recent best-selling book called *The Coming Jobs War* says the future of cities, regions, and entire nations rests on our willingness to act quickly to ensure that lower income families are put on the path of upward mobility. We need to generate millions of new jobs.

Now, it's true that references to “millions” aren't as eye-popping as they used to be, but in some contexts, the figures are still pretty hard to comprehend. For example, a North Carolina study revealed that 4 million school hours are lost annually in the state – and 51 million in the entire country – for reasons related to dental care. And even those kids with oral disease who are not missing school to get treatment are performing worse in school, one would guess simply because they are in misery.

How do we find our way out of this mess? One solution to this problem seems to lie in expanding the number of medical professionals who can identify dental problems in kids. The BCBSNC Foundation and others are working to move the conversation upstream, to obstetricians and pediatricians, who play a significant role in evaluating children's overall health and flagging diseases in their earliest stages and who can provide effective treatment in the form of a fluoride varnish.

There's no good reason why such a preventable problem is not being prevented. We have the compassion, we have the smarts, and as the Rolling Stones have so clearly proven, we have the money if this is truly something we want.

What can you do? For a start, you can make sure your elected representatives support a strong adult Medicaid dental benefit. Believe it – there is a direct link between parents' oral health status and that of their kids, and maintaining good oral health of our adults will result in better oral health for our children.

Secondly, think about how oral health fits into your family's routine. Encourage your kids' schools and child care centers to incorporate instruction on oral health. Do it. Raise this issue at medical visits to demonstrate to providers that there's a need for this information. Ask your dentist if their office accepts Medicaid and Health Choice. They'll get your message – they'll read the white space behind that question.

Third, there are a number of charitable causes in our state that are in need of your support as they work to protect the dental and overall health of children: North Carolina Missions of Mercy, the North Carolina Dental Health Fund, the North Carolina Dental Society's “Give Kids a Smile” Program, and others you can find online. If we can skip just a few cheeseburgers, or a few cups of coffee – or the grave sacrifice of missing the next Rolling Stones concert – a donation could make a big difference to some of our neighbors, our children, in North Carolina.

Finally, I ask you to share some of this information with others. Tell someone – tell everyone – that tooth decay in children is causing tremendous hardship on some of our state's most

vulnerable citizens. We need to put this issue on the agenda of pressing problems in our state – and beyond.

It's a preventable disease – and “preventable” minus action equals “failure.”

North Carolinians don't accept failure, especially not when it comes to our children. Please join me in raising awareness of this problem so it receives the urgent action it requires.

In closing, I'll concede that the Rolling Stones may not qualify as philosophers, but they have imparted some life lessons over the last 50 years. They once sang: “You can't always get what you want.” And that's certainly true – we can't **always** get what we want, some of our ambitions go unfulfilled.

But we do **sometimes** get what we want – and I know that you, like me, truly want to solve this problem. In this case, we **can** get what we want.