

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

February 24, 2018

Mouthwash In Prison

After watching the way prisons are portrayed on television and in movies, it would never occur to anyone to think that mouthwash would be available (or even wanted) in prison. But the only thing that separates most prisoners from free-world people are the fences which keep them isolated. The majority of prisoners are normal Americans trapped in an abnormal environment. In other words, prisoners use mouthwash, too.

Until August 2017, the prison canteen sold 24 ounce bottles of mouthwash for 94¢. Cheap, but effective. For no apparent reason, the canteen discontinued selling that mouthwash and instead offered us Close-Up cinnamon-flavored mouthwash, 16 ounces for \$1.85. Other than the fact that it tasted terrible and left a bad taste in your mouth, it was usable. Disgusting but usable.

In January 2018, a new era has dawned in prison. No more Close-Up. We now have Crest Pro-Health mouthwash, 8.4 ounces for \$5.86. Now I don't know how most people in the free world budget their money, but I would bet that paying \$5.86 for 8.4 ounces of mouthwash is something the average person wouldn't do. If free world people who have real jobs and a decent income would not squander their money in that manner, who would ever think a prisoner earning pennies per hour would do so?

I wrote to the Business Office and asked why the mouthwash was changed and was told that the DOC Canteen Committee requested it. Are they oblivious to how the thousands of prisoners under their control are living? Do they really not know that no one in prison could afford to buy a \$6 bottle of mouthwash based on the current prison wages?

Prison wages have been cut twice since I came to prison in 1984. Our spending power is a fraction of what it was decades ago. To make things worse, prisoners are now subject to confiscation of their paltry wages to pay court costs, restitution and child support arrearages. I'm all for holding prisoners accountable by making them pay their lawful obligations. But to squeeze out of their accounts the few pennies they earn to pay obligations is merciless and cruel. Add to that the \$6 bottles of mouthwash and anyone can see the system is broken.

The simple solution is to pay prisoners higher wages. Let prisoner wages increase with the rate of inflation so that our earning power stays the same instead of eroding year after year. Then maybe we'll be able to start buying and using mouthwash again.