



PRESS RELEASE

A real mouthful: Why mercury fillings should be banned

(Brussels, 25 May, 2007) - Leading health and environmental organisations which oppose the use of mercury today released new evidence of the deadly threat to human health and nature that many of us are carrying around in our mouths. Mercury is the main ingredient in dental amalgam, which is still widely used today by many dentists in fillings. The report, "Mercury in Dental Use: Environmental Implications for the European Union", reveals that mercury amalgam waste from EU countries is a major source of mercury contamination. This affects public health and the environment in Europe and worldwide, since mercury is a global pollutant. For this reason, the NGOs are pressing for mercury dental amalgams to be swiftly phased out.

The report is being released at today's EU conference on dentistry as a source of mercury contamination. A new fact sheet, "Mercury and Dental Amalgams", is also being released as part of the "Stay Healthy Stop Mercury" campaign (see links below under 'Notes for editors').

"Dental clinics are the biggest source of mercury in wastewater and the second biggest users of mercury in the EU, after the chlor-alkali industry", said Elena Lymberidi of the Zero Mercury Campaign at the European Environmental Bureau. "The report says dentists are estimated to use some 125 metric tonnes of the metal each year. According to the report, EU citizens are collectively carrying over 1,100 tonnes of mercury around in their mouths which will ultimately be released into the environment."

The uses of mercury in fillings, and its release, have not yet been adequately controlled at EU level, although there are serious efforts in some EU countries to apply emissions reduction measures. Dental use leads to the widespread dispersal of mercury into the environment in several ways including wastewater from dental clinics and homes, sewage sludge spread on land, solid waste incineration, and cremation. A certain proportion of this mercury becomes 'bio available' and further increases the risk to the environment and our health, particularly when we eat fish which have absorbed methylmercury which has been concentrated up through the food chain.

Methylmercury is formed by micro-organisms when mercury circulating in the environment comes into contact with soil and water. Methylmercury is an extremely toxic form of organic mercury that remains in the body for up to a year, and which can damage the development of babies' brains during pregnancy. "Dental amalgams are contributing to our exposure to methylmercury through the fish in our diet", said Lisette van Vliet of the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL). "This source of contamination is crying out for immediate reduction and eventual elimination."

Some EU countries, including Sweden and Denmark, have phased out or are restricting mercury in dentistry because of environmental and precautionary health concerns. A Norwegian documentary will be shown at today's conference which appears to indicate that some dental staff have suffered long-term harm from their occupational exposure to metallic mercury. Countries including Germany, Austria, Finland and France recommend against its use with pregnant and breastfeeding women, and young children.

In view of both the environmental concerns and the precautionary principle regarding direct health effects from amalgams, the NGOs are urging the European Commission to follow the European Parliament's request of March 2006 to act immediately to phase out the use of mercury in the dental sector as quickly as possible.

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Notes for editors:-

Mercury in Dental Amalgams

The EU Strategy adopted in January 2005 identified dental amalgam as an area of concern and requested an opinion from the EU Scientific Committee on Health & Environmental Risks to consider whether additional regulatory measures are appropriate. The European Commission consequently prepared questions on dental amalgams (DG ENV prepared questions on the environmental impact, and DG ENTR prepared questions on the health impacts and their alternatives). Both sets of questions were sent to DG SANCO (Health and consumer protection). DG SANCO passed these questions to the relevant Scientific Committees:- http://www.ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/committees_en.htm

The questions on environment (DG ENV) were sent to the Scientific Committee on Health & Environment Risks (SCHER): http://www.ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_scher/docs/scher_q_050.pdf

The questions on health (DG ENTR) were sent to the Scientific Committee on Emerging & Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR):-

http://www.ec.europa.eu/health/ph_risk/committees/04_scenihr/docs/scenihr_q_009.pdf

These two Committees will work in parallel over the coming months and publish their assessment in December 2007. In March 2006, the European Parliament asked the Commission to bring forward a proposal to restrict the use of mercury in dental amalgams by the end of 2007. Given these developments in scientific assessments and policy demands on the widespread use of mercury in dental amalgams, EEB, HEAL and the Zero Mercury Working Group are holding a conference entitled "Dental Sector as a source of mercury contamination" on 25 May 2007 in Brussels, as a contribution to engaging more stakeholders in this important debate. The agenda and other details can be found at:-

http://www.zeromercury.org/EU_developments/070525_EEB_Dental_Amalgam_conference.html

Report: "Mercury in Dental Use: Environmental Implications for the European Union":-

http://www.zeromercury.org/EU_developments/Maxson%20Dental%2014May2007%20-%20A5colour.pdf

Stay Healthy Stop Mercury campaign: <http://www.env-health.org/r/145>