

Phasing down dental mercury use

Advisory note for the Insurance Working Group of UNEP Finance Initiative

Prepared by the United Nations Environment Programme, Chemicals Branch

I. Background

- Mercury is a global environmental and social issue spanning many areas including products and wastes, industry, artisanal and small-scale gold mining, healthcare settings and dentistry, and cultural uses. Please visit:
http://www.chem.unep.ch/mercury/awareness_raising_package/default.htm
- In February 2009, governments decided through the UNEP Governing Council to move forward with a global mercury convention to protect human health and the environment from mercury. Negotiations will start in June 2010 and are to be concluded by 2013.
- While the provisions of the future mercury convention are yet to be negotiated, it is clear that the convention will have an impact on the dental profession. One can expect that measures within the future convention will encourage the reductions of mercury supply and demand, require increased transparency in global trade of mercury and include waste management provisions. Future restrictions are also expected to drive the price of mercury up in the short to medium term.
- The 2005 UNEP trade report reveals that mercury in dental use accounted for 240-300 tonnes of the total 3,000-3,900 tonnes total mercury demand in 2005, approximately 10% of total annual global mercury consumption, or 20% of total global mercury consumption in products.. Mercury used in dentistry has an environmental impact via the disposal of waste from dental clinics.
- Mercury-free alternatives to almost all uses of dental amalgam are commercially available today. The 2008 UNEP Global Report on Mercury Use in Products and Processes reveals that 3 countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) determined that the alternatives were adequate replacements for amalgam and, in 2008, imposed tight restrictions on dental amalgam. The dental profession in these countries have accepted this policy shift and have been able to follow it. In addition, Sweden's dental insurance policy reimburses only mercury-free alternatives for dental restoration.
- Many insurance companies have traditionally only covered the cost of amalgam fillings, for marginal price reasons. The higher price of alternative restorative materials is mainly due to the fact that the placement of fillings often takes longer (the material costs generally account for only 5-10% of the treatment costs, irrespective of the material). However, **the full long-term environmental cost burden is not reflected in these price differences.**

II. Issue

- WHO-UNEP jointly hosted an Expert Group meeting on dental restorative materials from 16-17 November 2009 in Geneva. At the meeting, the value of a global "phase down" of dental mercury use worldwide was recognized, while noting that there is still much work to be done in deciding how and when a global dental amalgam phase down will occur.

- One of the outcomes of the meeting is recognition that insurance companies will need to review their reimbursement policies to cover more than amalgam fillings in the future—a move that will encourage dentists and patients to shift to mercury-free alternatives.
- UNEP Chemicals will be consulting the Insurance Working Group of UNEP Finance Initiative in the coming months. Such consultation may include a sample survey on current insurance practices to help better inform the dental community as we move forward together.

In the interim, should you have any feedback or require further information, please contact the following:

Desiree Montecillo Narvaez
Programme Officer, Mercury & Other Metals
UNEP Chemicals
Geneva, Switzerland
T: +41 22 917 8865
desiree.narvaez@unep.org

Brenda Koekkoek
Programme Officer, Mercury & Other Metals
UNEP Chemicals
Geneva, Switzerland
T: +41 22 917 8867
brenda.koekkoek@unep.org

Butch Bacani
Programme Officer, Insurance & Investment
UNEP Finance Initiative
T: +41 22 917 8777
butch.bacani@unep.org

Miriam Wolf
Project Manager, Insurance
UNEP Finance Initiative
T: +41 22 917 8761
miriam.wolf@unep.org