World's Governments Agree to a 2020 Phase Out Date for the Clinical use of Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices With Few Exceptions and Phase Down of the Use of Mercury in Dental Restoration

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Geneva – One hundred and forty of the world's governments have finalized text for a global legally binding treaty on mercury, the bio-accumulative heavy metal that is poisoning the world's fish supply, threatening public health and the environment.

Among other measures, the treaty text mandates an end to the manufacture, import and export of mercury thermometers and blood pressure devices (sphygmomanometers) by 2020 with certain specific exceptions.

In 1999 the WFPHA observed that the unnecessary burning (by hospitals) of polyvinyl chloride plastic, paper, batteries, discarded equipment and other noninfectious materials leads to emissions of dioxins and mercury as well as furans, arsenic, lead, cadmium, and the generation of toxic ash. And further "realizing that this problem cannot be solved purely at the governmental level but must as well involve us in our communities and in providing health care. The Health Sector itself is a major source of these persistent pollutants as well as mercury, continuing problematic exposure for pregnant woman throughout the world. Supported efforts to phase out the use of mercury in the health care industry in the US and declare this to be an important goal on a global scale."

As part of this advocacy WFPHA has participated alongside the World Health Organization and other professional NGO's in the 3 year process that has brought this treaty to fruition. Early in the week it reported to the delegates of "the continued presence and attention to these negotiations by the World Federation of Public Health Associations, the World Medical Association, and Health Care Without Harm. From differing perspectives each has identified the public health threat posed by environmental mercury, in its methylated form, at exquisitely low doses to the most vulnerable of humans - pregnant women and small children. Each organization has participated in conjunction with the World Health Organization in efforts to educate our colleagues of the ability to phase out the use of mercury sphygmomanometers and thermometers and to replace them with non mercury devices of comparable accuracy, efficacy, and cost."

Meeting around the clock in a marathon fifth and final round, negotiators agreed on the phase out of these mercury based medical devices. While no longer in use in Europe, most of the United States, and several developing countries, they are still commonly found in hospitals and pharmacies in much of the rest of the world, exposing workers, patients and the global environment to mercury emissions when they break and/or are disposed of.

"WHO issued a policy in 2005 calling for the gradual phase out of mercury based thermometers and blood pressure devices together with their substitution with viable alternatives," said Dr Maria Neira, Director, WHO’s Department of Public Health and the Environment. “Today we are extremely pleased that the world's governments have agreed to such a phase– out. This will have a major benefit for global health."
The treaty also calls for a phase-down of the use of dental amalgam as an important step that the health sector can and should take to reduce its mercury emissions. Finally, it contains a specific article on health. This article calls for health monitoring, education and training of the health sector about mercury impacts. It is important in that it recognizes not only that mercury is both an environment AND health issue.

Specifically excluded from the treaty was Thimerosal, a mercury preservative used in multi dose vaccines primarily in developing countries where it is difficult to maintain the cold chain due to the importance of vaccination campaigns for global health and consistent with WHO's recommendation.

For more information see www.mercuryfreehealthcare.org