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While FDA reviews amalgam risks, NGO applauds WHO “phase down”

Washington, DC— While an FDA panel re-examines risks of amalgam over the next two days, the World Health Department is on the verge of releasing a new report recommending that amalgam use be “phased down” over time globally.

“We welcome WHO’s support for “phasing down” amalgam, and urge FDA to do the same,” said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project.

On Dec. 14-15, 2010, an FDA panel will discuss several scientific issues that may affect the regulation of dental amalgam. The panel meeting will focus particularly on the potential risk to vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women, fetuses, and young children.ⁱ

On a parallel track, the World Health Organization is expected to soon final its meeting report on “Future Use of Materials for Dental Restorations”ⁱⁱ in preparation for the upcoming Intergovernmental Negotiations Committee deliberations that are expected to lead to the adoption of a legally binding instrument on mercury by 2013.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to the draft report and minutes taken during the meeting,^{iv} the purpose of the meeting “...was to assess the scientific evidence available on dental restorative materials alternative to dental amalgam and the implications to countries of using alternatives to amalgam for dental restorative care.” It was also noted that “Mercury is one of the ten chemicals of major public health concern that WHO prioritizes,” and that “amalgam is a significant source of exposure,” but that its use is declining.

While a complete ban on amalgam may not be “realistic, practical and achievable,” at this time, the draft WHO report concludes that it may be prudent to consider ‘phasing down’ instead of ‘phasing out’ of dental amalgam at this stage,” with “a multi-prong approach with short, medium and long term strategies” considered.

The report also recognized that both immediate and long-term measures are needed to reduce or eliminate releases of mercury through coordinated national, regional and global actions.

Mercury is persistent, bioaccumulative toxin and can be transformed in the environment from dental offices into methylmercury,^v its most toxic form, which readily passes through both the placenta and blood-brain barriers. It accumulates in the bodies of humans and wildlife and can become more concentrated as it moves up the food chain, and poses a particular risk to pregnant women and young children who eat contaminated fish.

Norway has banned mercury, including dental amalgam, from January 1st 2008 (with two exceptions) and Sweden’s ban took effect from 1 June 2009. Denmark has announced intentions to do the same.

Endnotes:

ⁱ <http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/Newsroom/PressAnnouncements/ucm215061.htm>

ⁱⁱ http://mercurypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/who_mtg_report_nov_20102.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ UNEP's work on mercury is mandated by the 25th session of GC in 2009 when it requested UNEP Executive Director to convene an intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC) to prepare a global legally-binding instrument on mercury with the goal of completing it prior to the Governing Council meeting in 2013. <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/MercuryNot/MercuryNegotiations/tabid/3320/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

^{iv} http://mercurypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/minutes_who-unep_dentalrestorative.pdf

^v According to EPA, "When amalgam enters water, certain microorganisms can change it into methylmercury, a highly toxic form that builds up in fish, shellfish and animals that eat fish." <http://www.epa.gov/mercury/dentalamalgam.html>

www.mercurypolicy.org