

YOUR VOICE

Mercury doesn't belong in anyone's dentistry

By Dr. Mark Breiner

Congratulations to the Obama administration for its willingness to seek stricter controls on mercury pollution from the nation's power plants, and to the Environmental Protection Agency as it begins to cement these controls into written rules. Attempting to curb mercury emissions from industry is essential, and is a good jumping-off point when it comes to preserving our planet.

But isn't it time the federal and state governments took a more active role in eliminating mercury from other sources, such as mercury-amalgam dental fillings?

The World Health Organization describes mercury as highly toxic to human health. It doesn't matter whether you personally think mercury tooth fillings are a good or a bad thing. Clearly, I believe they are toxic and have no business in a human mouth, and I rely on sound scientific research to support my opinion. This is

research, for instance, which proves that mercury is emitted all day from your dental fillings in a toxic vapor form; that the amount of mercury in your brain correlates directly to the number of mercury fillings in your teeth; that mercury from fillings crosses the placenta to the fetus, and passes through breast milk to the nursing infant; and that mercury is the only toxin known to cause the same hallmark changes in a rat's brain as Alzheimer's.

Opinions on the efficacy or safety of mercury as a dental material aside, there is no question that the mercury currently filling your cavities will find its way into the environment sooner

or later, like it or not.

Even with equipment in many dental offices that filters water before it goes down the drain, inevitably little bits of mercury are washed down the sink of the dentist's office as amalgam fillings are installed, and more are washed away as fillings are later repaired. That's mercury potentially contaminating our water sources.

The largest source of mercury in human beings in developed countries is mercury vapor given off amalgam fillings each time you brush your teeth, drink a hot liquid or chew solid food. The vapor is then absorbed into your bloodstream. Eventually some of the mercury is excreted, thus entering the sewer system.

When a person dies and is buried, mercury from fillings leeches into the ground during decomposition. When a person is cremated, mercury vapor is released into the atmosphere. Air quality studies show an increase of mercury in the air over areas where cremations take place.

Mercury thermometers, blood pressure gauges and mercury-based preservatives in children's vaccines already are being banned around the world. That's because mercury is such a potent neurotoxin, known for years to cause or precipitate a multitude of serious medical problems.

The federal EPA has long required that when mercury-amalgam fillings are removed from patients, they be treated as hazardous waste, with severe penalties if they are not disposed of properly.

Even the Food and Drug Administration has become concerned. It took a while, but the FDA now concedes that storing

mercury in one's mouth might not be a sound strategy after all. After a 10-year lobby waged with petitions, Congressional hearings, a letter-writing campaign and, finally, a lawsuit, the FDA at last renounced its previous claims that no science exists that amalgam is unsafe. In a 180-degree reversal, it said "dental amalgams contain mercury, which may have neurotoxic effects on the nervous systems of developing children and fetuses."

Are there alternatives to mercury-amalgam fillings? Certainly. We have come a long way since the 1800s: there are excellent, environmentally benign composite materials available to fill dental cavities. Tooth colored, they are by all standards more aesthetically pleasing than "silver" and are even beneficial in that they help strengthen teeth.

More and more professionals practice mercury-free dentistry, which is great news for children facing their first cavities. If we really want to eliminate mercury pollution from our environment, we need to look beyond coal-fired power plants and mercury thermometers. We need to look a lot closer to home. It's time to ban the use of mercury in our mouths.

It should be the responsibility of each state government and, ultimately, the federal government to forewarn its citizens of the hazards of mercury in all of its forms, including amalgams — if not for their individual health, then certainly for the health of our environment.

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