

PRESS RELEASE



Nurses join international campaign for a ban on mercury

London, 12 January 2007 - The Royal College of Nursing has taken part in an awareness raising campaign on the need for a global ban on mercury.

Twelve British nurses provided hair samples for analysis as part of a small-scale survey in 21 countries. The results were published at a meeting in the European Parliament on Wednesday, 10 January 2007 by the "Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury" campaign. (1)

Sheelagh Brewer, RCN, says: "We wanted to be involved because nurses have a key role in health education. They need to know the risks associated with mercury exposure for the unborn child."

The survey found that one in six of the approximately 250 women involved had a level of mercury above a widely-accepted recommended safety dose. Mercury, unlike iron or magnesium, has no positive role in the human body.

Although the study was small, the results reaffirm figures published in the EU's 2005 extended impact assessment. (2) The findings are worrying because recent scientific reports have shown conclusively that low-level exposure to mercury in the womb can cause brain damage in children.

Dutch paediatrician Gavin ten Tusscher told the launch meeting in Brussels that exposure to mercury at current environmental levels is now a recognised danger for the next generation. "Mercury has long been recognised as a major source of toxicity in children causing reduced cognitive functioning, including reduced I.Q. However, we are now seeing that even 'low' exposure levels can cause damage to the developing brain of the foetus and infant. These are mercury levels that are not known to cause acute poisoning or ill health in adults," he says. (3)

The "Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury" campaign aims to raise awareness of a potential "child brain drain" taking place in Europe and around the world as a result of environmental mercury pollution. It calls for the European Union to show leadership in efforts to control environmental mercury pollution by securing a global ban on mercury. Ultimately, the only solution is to eliminate all uses of mercury everywhere, to collect and store remaining mercury safely and to clean up mercury pollution.

The two groups coordinating the campaign are the Health & Environment Alliance and Health Care Without Harm. RCN is a member of Health Care Without Harm.

Nurses can be exposed to mercury through their daily contact with mercury containing devices, such as thermometers and blood pressure devices. In case of leakage or breakage, they encounter the risk of being exposed to mercury vapours.

"To prevent the occupational health risk, we recommend hospitals and other healthcare facilities to use products that do not contain any mercury, such as digital thermometers and blood pressure devices that are readily available on the market," says Sheelagh Brewer.

Karolina Ruzickova, Health Care Without Harm Europe, told the Brussels meeting that the European Union has already implemented a number of measures restricting the use of mercury in certain

everyday products. "We would now like to see the European institutions adopt a ban on mercury in measuring devices including those used in healthcare such as blood pressure devices, granting exceptions only if there is evidence that no safe and accurate alternatives are available for clinical use," she said.

Harmful human exposure to mercury is mainly through the consumption of certain types of fish. These are mainly large predatory fish, such as tuna, shark and swordfish. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has put out guidelines on fish consumption for certain vulnerable groups but they are weak and not widely known.

Génon Jensen, Health & Environment Network, emphasises the need to inform women on how to protect themselves and their children. "Even if we stopped all mercury production and spills and emissions today, our global food supply would still be contaminated for years to come. Women need to have information now and we hope that this snapshot survey and campaign help to provide just that," she says.

The campaign does not want pregnant women and other people to stop eating fish and seafood because both are important sources of nutrients. "We are simply saying that it's better to eat smaller fish that are lower in the food chain and therefore less contaminated with mercury," Ms Jensen concludes.

The campaign also aims to ensure that the findings of biomonitoring of mercury, planned by the EU to start this year, will be rapidly conveyed to inform public education campaigns on the best exposure reduction measures.

Both organisers hope that the campaign transmits to leaders and industry worldwide, the silent, but increasing health damage of mercury to our children, and the urgency of acting today. The Health & Environment Alliance and Health Care Without Harm will advocate for a strong commitment to reduce mercury pollution as part of the Zero Mercury Campaign at the United Nations Development Programme meeting in Nairobi next month. (4)

Notes

1. The findings are published in a report entitled "Halting the child brain drain: Why we need to tackle global mercury contamination". The report also describes the effects such exposure can have on the mother's unborn child if she is pregnant and on children, and what should be done to reduce exposure to mercury. It will be available online at www.env-health.org from 12.30 on Wednesday, 10 January 2007.
2. The European Commission's Extended Impact Assessment is available on the EU Mercury Strategy page of DG Environment website at <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/chemicals/mercury/index.htm>. See page 12 for figures on mercury exposure in European communities.
3. Gavin ten Tusscher, M.D., Ph.D., paediatrician, Department of Paediatrics and Neonatology, Westfries Gasthuis, Hoorn, the Netherlands. Quote taken from the report. His presentation is available at www.env-health.org
4. The Governing Council meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/Global Ministerial Environmental Forum (GMEF) will take place in Nairobi on 5- 9 February 2007 – see Zero Mercury website at www.zeromercury.org - <http://www.unep.org/gc/gc24/> This meeting provides an excellent opportunity for EU negotiators to show leadership in pushing for a global ban on mercury.

For more information, please contact:

Karolina Ruzickova, Health Care Without Harm Europe, Tel/Fax +420 222 78 28 08, Mobile: +420 731 321 737 Email: karolina.ruzickova@hcwh.org Website: www.noharm.org/europe

Genon K. Jensen, Executive Director, Health & Environment Alliance, 28 Boulevard Charlemagne, B-1000 Brussels. Tel: +32 2 234 3641 (direct) Mobile: + 32 495 808732 Fax : +32 2 234 3649 E-mail: genon@env-health.org Website: www.env-health.org

Diana Smith, Communications, Health and Environment Alliance, Tel: +33 1 55 25 25 84, Mobile: +33 6 33 04 2943 E-mail: Diana@gsmith.com.fr Website: www.env-health.org

“Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” campaign brings together Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) and Health Care Without Harm Europe (HCWH) to mobilise the health community in Europe for a global ban on mercury. The activities are focused on raising awareness of the risks to health, especially for babies and pregnant women, and on working with women and health care professionals on how they can protect themselves and the environment from mercury exposure.

The Health & Environment Alliance (HEAL) is an international non-governmental organisation that aims to improve health through public policy that promotes a cleaner and safer environment. Our work draws on the findings of the environmental health science revolution, which is revealing the impact of environmental degradation on health in an ever-widening range of diseases and conditions. We represent a diverse network of more than 50 citizens', patients', women's, health professionals' and environmental organisations across Europe with a strong track record in bringing environmental health science and policy to an increasing number of platforms. Our vision is that of a healthy planet for healthy people.

Health Care Without Harm is an international coalition of more than 450 groups in 55 countries. Because the health of humans is intimately linked with the health of the environment, and healthcare is founded on the Hippocratic principle to 'first, do no harm', we believe healthcare should avoid polluting practices wherever possible. We are working together to transform the healthcare industry so that, without compromising patient safety or care, it is ecologically sustainable and no longer a source of harm to people and the environment. Our members include hospitals and healthcare systems, medical and nursing professionals, community groups, health-affected constituencies, labour unions, and environment and health organisations.