



“Child brain drain” cited in calls for EU-led global mercury ban

Brussels 20 December 2006 – The “Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” campaign will launch a report next month aiming to raise awareness of a “child brain drain” taking place in Europe and around the world. It calls on the EU to show leadership in efforts to control environmental mercury pollution by securing a global ban on mercury. (1)

Entitled “Halting the child brain drain”, the report provides the results of a survey measuring women’s low-level exposure to mercury and describes the effects such exposure can have on her unborn child if she is pregnant.

The publication will be launched at a meeting in Brussels on Wednesday, 10 January 2007 (2). The lunchtime meeting is organised by the Health & Environment Alliance and Health Care Without Harm, the two international health organisations behind the campaign. (3, 4) It is timed to send a message to global negotiators meeting in Nairobi in February 2007 of the urgent need for a worldwide ban. (5)

The scientific basis for the report is highlighted in a recent article published in *The Lancet*, one of the world’s leading medical journals. Professor Philippe Grandjean from Harvard University and the University of Southern Denmark and his co-author show how maternal exposure to methylmercury (6) and other neurotoxicants can affect cognitive development of human offspring. They refer to this loss of IQ in children as a “silent brain drain”. (7)

Europeans are known to be exposed to methylmercury, primarily through eating certain large, predatory fish, such as shark, swordfish or tuna. (8) A recent European Union impact assessment on mercury suggested that 1-5% of the general population have levels above the reference limit. Even more worrying is the fact that a percentage of this population, notably Mediterranean and Arctic fishing communities, have levels ten times as high as the recommended norm. This represents a level at which damage to the developing brain can occur.

Children appear to be more affected than adults. The EU assessment estimated that 44% of 3-6 year-old children in France might have mercury levels over the US recommended limit. (9)

In an effort to create a snapshot picture of mercury levels in women in the reproductive age group, the Health & Environment Alliance and Health Care Without Harm jointly organised the collection and analysis of hair samples from more than 250 women in 21 countries (10). The samples and completed questionnaires were returned to a Belgian laboratory for analysis. The survey findings are published in the report.

On 10 January, the “Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” campaign will discuss the report’s findings and call for European policy makers to support a global ban on mercury. “We want to see strong leadership and community involvement in global policy changes to speed up reductions in the use of mercury,” says Karolina Ruzickova, Health Care Without Harm. “Health professionals can and are already making a major contribution to ensuring effective reductions. We hope this campaign will help them to be even more vocal,” she says.

In addition to a global ban, immediate action is needed to inform women on how to protect themselves from mercury exposure. “What we are saying is that both before and during pregnancy, women are best advised to eat smaller fish that are low in the food chain because fish is an important source of nutrients,” Génon Jensen, Executive Director of the Health & Environment Alliance emphasises. “We welcome the fact that the EU’s human biomonitoring programme will include mercury when it starts early next year, but we want women to be made aware of how they can protect themselves and their children now.”

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Notes for journalists

1. **“Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” campaign:** Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) and Health Care Without Harm Europe (HCWH) are joining forces 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.

2. An invitation to the luncheon event to launch the “Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury: Halting the child brain drain” report is attached.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. 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.

6. Methylmercury is formed when mercury combines with carbon in the environment.

7. Grandjean, P, Landrigan P J, “Developmental neurotoxicity of industrial chemicals”, The Lancet, 8 Nov. 2006. It is available at http://www.env-health.org/a/2369?var_recherche=neurological+effects

8. Fact sheets on mercury produced by the “Stay Healthy, Stop Mercury” campaign focus on mercury and health, mercury in health care, mercury and fish consumption, mercury and vaccines, and several titles related to the health care setting. They can be downloaded at <http://www.env-health.org/r/128>

9. 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>

10. The 21 countries included in the survey are Argentina, Armenia, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Macedonia, Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and UK.