

Why Give Dentists A Pass On Mercury?

September 5, 2005

Betty McLaughlin

My lawyer friends tell me that if both the facts and the law are against you, the next move is to change the subject. That is what the Connecticut State Dental Association is trying to do.

The issue before our state is simple: Shall dentistry get immunity from the zero-mercury law? The Connecticut Audubon Society, the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice, the state NAACP, Clean Water Action, Trout Unlimited - and more than 80 percent of our state's voters, according to a recent poll by Zogby International - say no. If we start carving out exemptions, one camel's nose in the tent will likely undo a law written to rid the state of mercury products.

If anything, our health professionals should be the leaders, not last holdouts, as we try to rid our state of this neurotoxin, one that damages our water, air and ultimately the health of our children. The dental association replies, in effect, that many of its members still use mercury-based fillings and don't want to change, so the law shouldn't apply. Many Connecticut dentists have already made the switch; they never use a so-called "silver" filling.

The state's zero-mercury law spurs a transition away from mercury that is already underway. It's the dentists trade group, not the profession, that is holding back needed change.

This year, the New England Zero Mercury Campaign, with leadership from Clean Water Action's Connecticut office, issued a report card on dental mercury use. The report recognized the colossal contribution that dental offices and fillings make to mercury pollution: The largest contributor of mercury to the wastewater, the largest contributor of household mercury and by far the largest amount of mercury to potentially pollute the environment is the mercury that is still in our mouths. Dentists are the nation's third-largest purchaser of mercury, buying 700 pounds a year in Connecticut alone.

The sad reality: "Silver fillings," which really are at least 50 percent mercury, are a hazardous waste, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency. To say a dentist catches what doesn't go into the mouth misses the point. After the fillings are placed, most of that mercury walks right out of the dentist's office. And as more people choose cremation, the problem gets worse: One reason it is tough to put crematoriums near schools or homes is because mercury from teeth gets pumped into the air.

It would be hard to find a high school chemistry teacher who would agree with the dental association's claim that mercury in the mouth is a safe compound like table salt. Sodium and chloride lose their individual properties when combined to become salt - a new compound is created. But mercury in the mouth is an amalgam, not a new compound, and it is not inert. Mercury vapors continually emanate from the fillings.

Whether the fillings are safe or not is being debated intensely, but it is not the issue at hand. However, the dental association's claim that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is on their side is no longer true. In July, the CDC issued a report saying mercury from amalgam is a major source of mercury in our bodies.

The dental association reacts to public opinion by claiming citizens are ignorant and the elected officials are "political hacks." What is so ignorant about pregnant women wanting to avoid exposure to mercury, or parents wanting mercury-free drinking water, or sportsmen wanting mercury-free lakes for fishing? Legislators from both political parties support enforcing Connecticut's zero-mercury law, including Reps. Richard Roy, D-Milford, head of the legislature's Environment Committee; T.R. Rowe, R-Trumbull; Robert Megna, D-New Haven; Diana Urban, R-Stonington; and Sen. Edith Prague, D-Norwich.

Mercury amalgam is a 19th-century invention that has no place in the 21st century.

Betty McLaughlin is director of Environmental Affairs for the Connecticut Audubon Society and a founding member of the Coalition to Enforce Connecticut's Zero Mercury Law.