**Washington Academy of Family Physicians**

Resolution

Title: **Preventing Human and Environmental Mercury Exposure and Harm**

For Introduction: May 2002 Annual Meeting

Sponsored by the Commission on Public Health and Scientific Affairs

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**Whereas,** Mercury is a component of consumer and medical products, which, when discarded or through accidental breakage, enters the environment.

**Whereas,** Mercury is a recognized hazardous pollutant that is persistent in the environment once introduced, becoming more concentrated at higher levels of the food chain; and

**Whereas,** It is understood that when inorganic mercury is released into the environment, microbial biotransformation produces methylmercury, especially in aquatic environments, and that this organic compound accumulates as one moves up the food chain (1); and

**Whereas,** Studies have shown that very low doses of mercury result in impaired childhood neurobehavioral function, including problems with attention, verbal learning, vocabulary, and neuromotor function (2); and

**Whereas,** According to the National Academy of Sciences, mercury exposure may cause neurological problems in 60,000 children born in the United States each year (3); and

**Whereas,** It is known that appropriate alternative mercury-free products are currently available for many mercury-containing consumer and health care products (4)

**Whereas,** The Washington State Department of Ecology has recognized the human and environmental health risks of mercury, and has targeted mercury as the first persistent bioaccumulative toxic chemical to address in its “Strategy to Continually Reduce Persistent Bioaccumulative Toxins in Washington State”(5); and

**Whereas,** The State of Washington has determined that mercury contamination in fish reaches sufficiently high levels that fish consumption advisories must be issued; and

**Whereas,** The State of Washington, due to mercury contamination, has issued warnings about eating fish from Lake Whatcom, Lake Roosevelt, Sinclair Inlet, and Eagle Harbor (6); and

**Whereas,** The Washington State Department of Health in April, 2001, warned women of childbearing age and children under six not to eat any shark, swordfish, tilefish, king mackerel, or tuna steaks (7); and

**Whereas,** A mere 1 gram (1/28th ounce) of mercury emitted into a 20-acre lake can cause the fish to be unsafe for human consumption; and

**Whereas,** The American Hospital Association has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the EPA to phase out mercury-contaminated waste in hospitals by the year 2005, while highly-effective programs for the virtual elimination of mercury from hospital waste through use of mercury-free alternative products have been initiated in the US (8); therefore, be it

**RESOLVED,** That the Washington Academy of Family Physicians (WAFP) encourage physicians and hospitals to phaseout the purchase and use of mercury-containing products where alternatives are possible; and be it further

**RESOLVED,** That the WAFP urge medical product suppliers to continue to develop, produce, and market appropriate, cost-competitive, environmentally protective and effective mercury-free replacements; and be it further

**RESOLVED,** That the WAFP encourage physicians to inform patients about fish consumption advisories; and be it further

**RESOLVED,** That the WAFP call upon health care professionals to encourage the institutions with which they are associated to adopt policies that will lead toward the eventual elimination of mercury containing products where feasible, effective alternatives are available; and be it further

**RESOLVED,** That the WAFP urge the Washington State Department of Ecology to develop a strong plan for the reduction and elimination of mercury into Washington’s environment, and to include in the plan the provisions of the Mercury Reduction and Education Act of 2002 (SB6533; HB2686), which was supported by WAFP (9).

**References:**

1. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Mercury Fact Sheet, US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, September 1995.

2. National Academy of Sciences. Toxicological Effects of Methylmercury, 2000. p. 273.

3. National Academy of Sciences. Ibid. p. 276

4. Going Green: A Resource Kit for Pollution Prevention in Health Care: “Making Medicine Mercury-Free, A Resource Guide for Mercury-Free Medicine”. Health Care Without Harm. October 15, 2001.

5. Washington State Department of Ecology. “Strategy to Continually Reduce Persistent Bioaccumulative Toxins in Washington State”.

6. Washington State Department of Health Fish Advisories. [www. doh.wa.gov/ehp/oehas/EHA\_fish\_adv.htm.2002](http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/oehas/EHA_fish_adv.htm.2002).

7. Washington State Department of Health. News Release: State Issues “Fish Consumption Advisory”: Too Much Mercury. April 12, 2001.

8. American Hospital Association: Memorandum of Understanding between the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the American Hospital Association, June 24, 1998; Environmental Working Group and Health Care Without Harm. Greening Hospitals: An Analysis of Pollution Prevention in America’s Top Hospitals, 1998.

9. Mercury Reduction and Education Act of 2002 in Washington State. Senate Bill 6533; House Bill 2586.