

Correspondence with the NYC DEP on Sampling for Ritualistic Mercury in Wastewater:

03/16/00 A. Wendroff to R. Adamski, NYC DEP

06/09/00 R. Adamski, NYC DEP to A. Wendroff

01/16/02 X. Lopez, NYC DEP to A. Wendroff

01/16/02 A. Wendroff to “Dear Colleagues” [in ritualistic mercury research.]

01/16/02 M. Feinberg, SBCAC to X. Lopez, NYC DEP et al.

01/16/02 A. Wendroff to M. Feinberg, et al.

03/26/02 A. Lopez, NYC DEP to A. Wendroff

This correspondence illustrates the initial acquiescence of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection to my suggestion that they sample wastewater from heavily Hispanic and Caribbean neighborhoods for elevated levels of mercury. However, when I brought this issue to the attention of a community environmental organization, the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition (SBCAC), they “found [my] idea of doing wastewater sampling for ritual mercury curious.” And thought that “DEP resources would be put to much better use by ... testing the wastewater emitted by hospitals ...” The SBCAC failed to appreciate the cost effectiveness of using wastewater mercury levels as an indirect indicator of mercury in homes. Evidently the DEP bowed to the political pressure brought to bear by the SBCAC, as the last letter in this series illustrates.

Note that Deputy Commissioner A. Lopez’s letter refers to the NYAS Harbor Mercury Report (located on their web site:) This study found that the input of mercury to the harbor from religious and cultural uses was equal to that from electric utility furnaces and just below that from households and broken clinical thermometers.



March 16, 2000

Robert E. Adamski, P.E.
Deputy Commissioner
Director
Bureau of Waste Water Pollution Control
N.Y.C. Department of Environmental Protection
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Dear Mr. Adamski,

I was referred to you by your colleague, Robert LaGrotta, regarding my enquiries on mercury levels in New York City's sewage effluent. As I had discussed first with Philip Heckler, and then with Mr. LaGrotta, I suspected that there might be elevated mercury levels in sewage lines draining Caribbean and Hispanic neighborhoods. My suspicion was based on my knowledge that these communities engaged in magico-religious and ethnomedical uses of mercury which resulted in its entering sewer lines, both domestic as well as storm.

Mr. LaGrotta kindly furnished me with, and discussed with me over the phone, your 1998 Headworks Analysis, which *predicted* a total loading of 1.5 lbs./day, but *found* 3.15 lbs./day. In your discussion you suggested that this discrepancy might be due to dental amalgam. I suggest it might as well be explained by discarded mercury put to magico-religious use, or by mercury defecated by individuals who have ingested it for its ethnomedical use in treating abdominal complaints. This latter use, by the way, would enable the mercury to pass through the traps in toilets and home sewer lines, and into sewer mains, as long as the mercury was embedded in the fecal mass.

My objective in writing to you is to ask the DEP to further investigate mercury contamination of our sewer system, and its effluent. I suggest that an analysis of sewage effluent for mercury be made from one or more heavily Caribbean and/or Hispanic neighborhoods known to have a large number of botanicas selling elemental mercury for magico-religious uses. A control neighborhood/s would be matched for whatever criteria you thought apropos, but in neighborhood/s where the population was not likely to be users of mercury (Afro-American, Euro-American). Obviously these neighborhoods would have to be served by sewer mains reasonably exclusive to themselves.

The hypothesis again being that the Caribbean and Hispanic neighborhood/s will exhibit markedly higher sewage mercury levels, than the control neighborhood/s. Confirmation of this hypothesis would assist in defining the "missing" mercury in DEP's headworks analysis; would help define patterns of magico-religious mercury use; and would provide the DEP Commissioner an incentive to subpoena the

sales records of wholesale and retail outlets selling mercury to the public which ends up contaminating the waters surrounding New York City, and the sewage sludge and municipal solid waste we have to export elsewhere.

As the literature I sent to Mr. LaGrotta suggests, the amount of mercury sold for these magico-religious uses is substantial. My estimate, based on data published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, and reprinted elsewhere, is that some 930 pounds of mercury were sold for these uses in the Bronx in 1995.

So, I urge you to conduct the study I've suggested. I expect that funding assistance, if needed, could be obtained from the EPA. I am a member of the EPA's Ritualistic Uses of Mercury Taskforce, and it would be extremely interested in learning more about the distribution patterns of magico-religious mercury use.

I look forward to discussing this matter with you, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely yours,