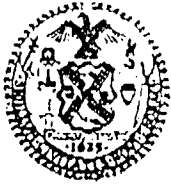


THE CITY OF NEW YORK
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER



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NEW YORK, NY 10013

January, 2000

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COMMISSIONER
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Dear Colleague:

Enclosed is a brochure developed by the New York City Department of Health describing a route of exposure to metallic mercury that may affect some of your patients. It has been reported that in some Latin American and Caribbean communities in the city, metallic mercury available in botanicas and religious stores is used in religious or ethnomedical practices in a manner that may adversely affect health.

The type of damage to the body caused by this form of mercury is dependent on how much and for how long a person is exposed to it. Mercury vapors can persist in indoor environments for long periods of time, and, because the vapors are invisible, people who live in or regularly visit homes where mercury is used may not be aware that they are being exposed. Unfortunately, metallic mercury has the greatest effect on the developing central nervous systems of fetuses and young children.

In order to ensure the well-being of your patients and their families, they should be made aware of the potential dangers of mercury use. You can respect your patients' religious and cultural beliefs and still provide effective care. The first step is to ask patients about their use of traditional/folk treatments and whether they use metallic mercury. The enclosed brochure includes more information on the health effects of mercury, how to test for absorption and how to address patient concerns.

In addition, the New York City Department of Health has prepared patient-education brochures in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole. Sample copies are enclosed. Please call (212) 788-4290 to request additional copies. Thank you for your attention to this problem and your efforts to improve the health of all New York City residents.

Sincerely,

Neal L. Cohen, M.D.
Commissioner

NLC/nj