

Magico-Religious Mercury Use and Cultural Sensitivity

In his recent commentary, "AIDS Prevention and Cultural Sensitivity: Are They Compatible?" Bayer concluded, "Homilies about cultural sensitivity must be replaced by a forthright acknowledgment that we cannot seek radical behavioral and normative change while adhering to a dictum that serves principally to protect the status quo."^{1(p897)}

Although Bayer specifically addresses acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), his logic pertains to other complaints possessing culturally determined risk factors, including intoxication resulting from the magico-religious use of mercury in Hispanic and Caribbean homes.² Although the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has recently initiated a public awareness campaign to deal with "the burning or sprinkling of elemental mercury in homes and cars,"³ there has

been resistance on the part of numerous Hispanic "stakeholder" organizations to "regulatory action" involving the sale of illegally unlabeled mercury for magico-religious and ethnomedical use.⁴

Despite urging EPA "to begin its risk communication efforts quickly in order to show its concern for the affected population,"^{4(p7)} the three national Hispanic stakeholder organizations EPA consulted felt that a more active intervention, such as enforcing the existing Federal Hazardous Substances Act labeling requirements (16 CFR §§1500-1512), "would send the message of government interference in the practicing of one's religion."^{4(p8)} The stakeholder organizations agreed that "any discussion of the religious implications of [mercury use] should be omitted from the risk communication message."^{4(p7)}

EPA stated that "because of the cultural aspects of this problem [of magico-religious mercury use], any regulatory action would probably be very difficult to enforce."^{4(p6)} Similar sentiments have been voiced by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), which has refused to exercise its subpoena powers to examine the sales records of distributors of illegally unlabeled or inadequately labeled mercury. Such records provide data on the amount of mercury sold for magico-religious purposes, as well as the geographical distribution of such sales, and would eliminate "many [of the] uncertainties . . . regarding the extent . . . of use of mercury in these practices."^{4(p3)} Both EPA's and CPSC's actions (or inactions) illustrate Bayer's observation that "acceding to the demands of cultural sensitivity . . . not only is not a prerequisite for effective public health practice but would be inimical to the goals of . . .

prevention." Both EPA and CPSC appear to have acceded to these demands by failing to enforce existing culturally neutral regulations requiring adequate labeling of mercury. They are thus maintaining the status quo at the expense of protecting the public's health. □

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References

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3. EPA warns health officials of mercury threat to Hispanics. *The Nation's Health*. 1994(May/June):5.
4. *RM2 Assessment Document for Cultural Uses of Mercury*. Washington, DC: Office of Prevention, Pesticides and Toxic Substances, US Environmental Protection Agency; June 9, 1993.