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November 1, 2000

Mr. Arnold P. Wendroff, Ph.D.
Mercury Poisoning Project
544 Eighth Street
Brooklyn NY 11215-4201

Dear Mr. Wendroff:

Int. 832 – A Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to banning the testing of gas piping systems with gauges that use mercury.

Oversight: The Use, Hazards and Clean-up of Mercury used for Testing and Metering Gas

Please be advised that the Committee on Housing and Buildings will hold a hearing on **Thursday, November 9, 2000 at 1:00 PM in the Council Chambers, City Hall, 2nd Floor, New York, NY** regarding the above-referred topic.

You are hereby invited to attend this hearing and testify therein. Please feel free to bring with you such members of your staff you deem appropriate to the subject matter.

If possible, please send **Thirty (30)** copies of your written testimony to my office prior to the hearing date. If this is not feasible and you plan to participate, it would be greatly appreciated if you could bring these copies to the hearing.

I would appreciate receiving a response from you as to whether or not you will be able to attend. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Gary Altman
Legislative Counsel

GA:jl

Statement of the New York City Department of Health

on

Int. No. 832,

In relation to banning the testing of gas piping systems
with gauges that use mercury

for the

New York City Council Committee of Housing and Buildings
Oversight Hearing on Int. No. 832

November 9, 2000

As part of its broad mission to protect the public health with respect to environmental and occupational disease among New Yorkers, as well as perform environmental assessments and investigate toxic substance releases, the New York City Department of Health is concerned with mercury as a potential cause of human illness.

The number of New Yorkers reported to have mercury poisoning, as determined by elevated blood or urine mercury levels, has historically been fewer than 50 per year. In 1998, there were a total of 19 cases reported; in 1999, there were 38 cases, and so far this year, there have been 22. Most cases are associated with occupational exposure. A few cases are associated with such exposures as dietary sources of mercury (for example, a large fish intake), and certain medical treatments. Thus far, no cases have been associated with gauges used for gas piping.

The Department works actively to prevent mercury exposure in a number of settings:

- To educate people who use mercury in traditional medicine or for spiritual or religious purposes, in March of this year, the Department distributed its booklet *Azogue/Vidajan: Metallic Mercury Poisoning* to approximately 120 botanicas citywide that were identified primarily through listings in telephone directories. The booklet explains how to avoid exposure and how to safely clean up small mercury spills. The Department also surveyed about 60 botanicas between June and October of this year, and found no establishment in which mercury was not appropriately labeled.

- The Department concurrently developed *Metallic Mercury Exposure: A Guide for Health Care Providers* and distributed it to some 4,000 clinicians citywide specializing in family practice, general practice, obstetrics, gynecology and pediatrics. The *Guide*, which has a special focus on patients who may be using mercury in religious, spiritual or folk treatments, discusses routes of exposure, signs and symptoms, health effects, treatment and disposal, and provides referral information.
- The Department has in past years developed procedures for safe repair of sphygmomanometers (blood pressure machines) found in acute care centers and other health care settings.

The Department supports the expressed intent of Int. No. 832, which is to ban the use of mercury-containing gauges for testing of gas piping systems. While the testing of pipes carrying gas is critically important to assuring public safety, mercury is a toxic substance posing a potential human health hazard. Since gauges that both contain no mercury and adequately substitute for the mercury-containing variety are readily available, and are in fact already in use for the purpose in question, no countervailing reason argues against changing the Building Code to reduce a potential route of human exposure to mercury.

Although clearly not the intention of the bill, the Health Department is concerned about what may be interpreted as an open-ended ban against the distribution and sale of either "gauges utilizing mercury" or "any replacement mercury for use in such gauges". Mercury is used in equipment and procedures with clinical and health care related applications, as well as other applications, that might be disrupted or otherwise adversely affected by such a ban. Language in the bill should be made more specific to focus on the ban of gauges that use mercury for testing gas piping.

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