

## Public forum set on mercury fillings

Maura Lerner, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

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A national consumer group has launched a campaign to get rid of mercury fillings in dental offices, and it's bringing the battle to Minnesota next week.

The group, called the Coalition to Abolish Mercury Dental Fillings, petitioned the Minnesota Board of Dentistry to start publicizing the health risks of mercury-based fillings, which have been used to treat cavities for more than a century.

Most medical and dental organizations say the fears are baseless.

But the dental board has scheduled a special public meeting June 4 to air the long-simmering debate about mercury, which has been shadowing the dental profession for years.

The critics argue that mercury poisoning from dental fillings is to blame for a wide range of chronic conditions, from multiple sclerosis to autism to Alzheimer's disease.

But the dental board, among other groups, maintains that scientific evidence has proved that mercury fillings are safe.

"It's a very, very small group that unfortunately makes a lot of noise and gets notoriety," said Dr. Scott Lingle, a St. Paul dentist and past president of the Minnesota Dental Association.

Mercury is one of the ingredients in silver fillings, also known as amalgam; it's considered one of the most durable and least expensive types of cavity-fillers.

The consumer coalition says that mercury, which is a known poison, can leak from the fillings and damage the nervous system, reproductive system and other organs.

"What I think is we have millions and millions of people who were affected by mercury in their teeth, but they don't know it," said Freya Koss of Consumers for Dental Choice, an advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., that formed the anti-mercury coalition.

In its petition, the group said the American and Minnesota dental associations "have taken strong steps to keep the public unaware that amalgam's major component is mercury, because the public is increasingly aware of mercury's horridly toxic properties."

But scientists say the vast majority of scientific studies has found no evidence of any danger, other than rare allergic reactions.

Scientists say that the mercury does not pose a danger in fillings because it's used in tiny amounts and combined with other elements into a stable compound.

It is, Lingle said, much like mixing hydrogen and oxygen to form water. "You can't separate the parts out any more than I can take an ice cube and smash it hard enough to get the hydrogen out. In very simple form, that's the chemistry behind it."

The coalition accused the Minnesota Board of Dentistry, which licenses dentists, of trying to stop dentists from talking about the dangers of mercury. And it wants the board to publish a brochure on the risks.

Marshall Shragg, the board's executive director, said that there is no gag order and that the board expects dentists to give accurate information on the risks and benefits of procedures.

In 1996, a Bloomington dentist, Dr. Gary Jacobson, gave up his license after the board accused him of misleading patients about the dangers of mercury fillings. Jacobson admitted that he told patients he could cure or treat their illnesses by removing mercury fillings.

Anti-mercury groups rallied to Jacobson's defense, saying he was hounded out for his anti-mercury stance.

But Schragg said the dental board does not target dentists for their views, and responds only to complaints about their behavior.

Since 1996, he said, no dentists have been disciplined over the mercury issue. He said next week's hearing will give both sides a chance to air any new information. Maura Lerner is at [mlerner@startribune.com](mailto:mlerner@startribune.com).