

From: MJLondon@aol.com
Subject: News broadcast - Minneapolis
BROADCAST TRANSCRIPT

Date May 26, 2004 Time 10:00 PM - 10:35 PM
Station WCCO 4 News Program WCCO 4 News
Location Minneapolis/St. Paul

RANDI KAYE, co-anchor:

Plus, mercury is toxic. The I-TEAM investigates why dentists still put it in our mouths.

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(Unrelated Segments)

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DON SHELBY, co-anchor:

If you think those fillings in your mouth are silver, you're only somewhat right. Actually, they are 50 percent mercury. And of course, mercury is toxic. Now, an advocacy group is demanding that Minnesota's dentists tell patients more about what they're putting in your mouth.

Here's the I-TEAM's David Schechter. David.

DON SCHECHTER reporting:

Don, on the one hand, science says mercury in dental fillings is safe. But on the other, several countries restrict its use for health reasons.

For such a basic topic, this is a really hot debate.

EUGENIA (Dental patient): I started out in life as an 8-cylinder, full-power person, and at my worst during this illness, I was at 2 cylinders.

SCHECHTER: For years, Eugenia, a Minneapolis nurse, battled a host of health problems, including extreme fatigue and memory loss. When she took these blood tests, she says they showed mercury in her system. (Visual of blood test paperwork)

EUGENIA: Well, the only explanation for that is that it came in the form of mercury fillings.

SCHECHTER: She had her old fillings removed, which were made from amalgam, a blend of metals, including silver and 50 percent mercury. (Visual of amalgam fillings) When her fillings were replaced with a white-colored plastic resin, she started to feel better. (Visual of a plastic resin filling)

EUGENIA: Why would anybody have the right to put a known poison in someone's mouth?

SCHECHTER: For all the advances of modern dentistry, inexpensive and durable amalgam fillings have hardly changed since the Civil War.

Dr. BOYD HALEY (University of Kentucky): When a dentist pulls it in the office, he has to place it in a sealed container under liquid glycerin, to keep the vapors from coming out of the amalgam and contaminating the workplace with the secretaries and office workers. And it's safe in your mouth?

SCHECHTER: Dr. Boyd Haley is head of chemistry at the University of Kentucky, and says unhealthy levels of mercury vapor escape dental fillings. To make his point, Haley brushed this amalgam filling, then used a mercury-sensing device that detects mercury vapor. (Visual of Dr. Haley testing the amalgam filling for mercury vapor with device)

Dr. HALEY: If the EPA came in and found that much mercury in our labs, they'd shut us down.

SCHECHTER: Then under a black light, you can see the vapors coming off. (Visual of black light and vapors rising from filling)

Mercury is something that we all know is bad. Why is it good when it is in your mouth?

Dr. KIM HARMS (American Dental Association): We aren't putting mercury in people's teeth. We're putting in dental amalgam. It's combined into a very, very tough compound.

SCHECHTER: Dr. Kim Harms is a dentist in Lakeville, and a spokesperson for the American Dental Association. She says amalgam is safe. (Visual of "Member of ADA, The American Dental Association" sign)

The ADA says Haley's experiment is misleading because inside the mouth, proteins in saliva coat the teeth, locking in most, but not all, of the vapors.

Dr. HARMS: In the most sensitive person, it would take 500 amalgam restorations to cause any ill effect. And we only have 32 teeth.

Dr. HALEY: I think the ADA is the biggest culprit in the deception of the dangers of mercury exposure.

SCHECHTER: Some believe there's a link between mercury and diseases, like autism, MS, and Lou Gehrig's Disease. Haley's published research links mercury to Alzheimers.

Dr. HALEY: Mercury is by far the best suspect right now. However, the Alzheimers Association disagrees, saying

there is no relationship between silver dental fillings and Alzheimers. And the FDA says, "No valid scientific evidence has shown that amalgams cause harm to patients."

SCHECHTER: Companies spend a lot of money testing products, so they can earn the ADA's seal of approval. That means they're safe and effective. Products like toothpaste, dental floss, and mouthwash. (Visual of Aquafresh toothpaste, dental floss, and bottle of mouthwash)

Amalgam also has the ADA's seal of approval, but some critics say it's a conflict of interest for the ADA to help market a product that's so controversial.

Dr. HARMS: Absolutely not. The seal of acceptance is designed as a consumer aid to help consumers when they're purchasing products and to help dentists when they're trying to evaluate whether something works.

SCHECHTER: But Dr. Haley remains unconvinced. He says he's paid a professional price for his opposition to mercury, losing out on research funding. But he thinks he's right. So do people like Eugenia. And Haley does not plan to give up.

Dr. HALEY: Shouldn't we try to get rid of the major source of mercury exposure to humans? And that's dental amalgams.

SCHECHTER: Next week, an advocacy group will push for new rules requiring Minnesota dentists to inform patients about the pros and cons of mercury in fillings. Maine and California already provide that information to patients.

SHELBY: David, in your piece, of course, Dr. Haley is the main spokesperson against the use of mercury. My question is how widespread is it throughout the industry?

SCHECHTER: That's a good question. The FDA right now is taking a fresh look at the issue, and also there are several organizations fighting for mercury-free dentistry. There are also dentists across the country who choose not to use mercury in their practices. And that number is growing.

SHELBY: Thanks, David.

SCHECHTER: Thank you.