

Response to Negative Media Coverage on Dental Amalgam

If you were polled about whether a flavoring agent that contains the poisonous elements chlorine and sodium should be banned because alternatives exist, would you say yes? If so, did you know you're in favor of banning table salt?

This is the logic behind the recent poll released by a group trying to manipulate the public, legislators, public agencies and the press into believing a ban is necessary on dental amalgam, a commonly-used material to fill tooth cavities (Connecticut section, Aug. 10, "Poll: Strong Opposition To Mercury Fillings.") This "push-polling" is a common ploy used by political operatives—you take a "survey" in which the questions are carefully worded and ordered to lead the respondent to a preordained conclusion. Then you release the "findings" and claim that everyone agrees with you.

In this case, the fear mongering is based on the fact that an ingredient in dental amalgam is mercury. Yes, amalgam contains mercury, but the critical point missing from this week's media coverage is that when the mercury is combined with other metals—generally silver, copper, tin and zinc—it forms a safe, stable alloy which has entirely different physical and chemical properties than mercury by itself. Dentists have used amalgam for generations, safely and effectively, to treat dental decay in millions of Americans. Should the Department of Environmental Protection next be pressured to ban water because it contains (gasp!) hydrogen—a known explosive?

It's important to understand the minimal impact dental amalgam has upon the environment. How minimal? According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, less than one percent of mercury released to the environment comes from dentistry. And under Connecticut law, dentists in our state are already capturing up to 99 percent of waste amalgam in their offices, preventing its release to the environment. The vast majority of mercury emissions to the environment from human activity come from coal-fired power plants. So at this point, banning amalgam in Connecticut is rather like removing a single grain of sand from the beach.

There are alternative materials to fill cavities, including tooth-colored composite fillings, which are more natural-looking, and gold-colored fillings which are the most durable. But amalgam remains a valuable choice for some patients with particular needs, such as cavities below the gum line or deep cavities in back teeth. Because amalgam hardens quickly and tolerates moisture (e.g. saliva) during the hardening process, many dentists rely on it to treat young children and special needs patients who have a hard time keeping still during treatment. Taking away amalgam means more lengthy and complicated treatment for these patients (up to using general anesthesia in a dental office or hospital setting simply to fill cavities). Plus, some dental insurance companies and state assistance programs may not cover alternatives to amalgam. On average, tooth-colored resin fillings can cost up to almost 50 percent more than amalgam, gold-colored fillings are over five times more expensive than amalgam, and ceramic tooth-colored fillings are up to seven times more expensive than amalgam.

Major organizations entrusted with protecting the public's health have reviewed a veritable mountain of scientific evidence and concluded that amalgam is a safe, effective material to treat cavities. These include the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and the American Dental Association. Who do we want advising us about health care? These trusted scientific and public health organizations, or a group that believes these agencies and the nation's dentists are involved in a vast conspiracy?

It's bad enough when political hacks employ push-polling to influence elections. When special interest groups use it to set public policy that affects our health care is deplorable. Banning amalgam makes no sense. Let's keep health care treatment decisions where they belong—in the hands of doctors and the patients they serve.

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