



# STATE OF NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Center for Environmental Health

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Mark R. Chassin, M.D., M.P.P., M.P.H.

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**OFFICE OF PUBLIC HEALTH**

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*Center Director*

March 3, 1993

Arnold P. Wendroff, Ph.D.  
298 Marlborough Road  
Brooklyn, NY 11226

Dear Dr. Wendroff:

Thank you for your letter of 2/7/93 and the attached literature describing the domestic uses of mercury. Using mercury in the domestic setting could present a health risk to residents and visitors. Evaluation of the extent of such usage and possible associated adverse health effects is an interesting and worthwhile avenue of research. I encourage you to pursue this research because it may present important implications for protecting the public's health, especially of children.

Sincerely,

Alice Stark, Dr. P.H.  
Director  
Bureau of Environmental & Occupational  
Epidemiology

/cyr



U.S. CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY COMMISSION

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20207

JUL 16 1993

OFFICE OF COMPLIANCE  
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Arnold P. Wendroff, Ph.D.  
298 Marlborough Road  
Brooklyn, NY 11226

Dear Dr. Wendroff:

Chairman Jones-Smith has asked that I reply to your June 9, 1993 letter regarding the continued sale of mercury for religious and ethnomedical uses in the home.

As you are aware the CPSC has expressed its concern that mercury vapors can be hazardous. The Commission has taken steps to warn against the practice of sprinkling mercury around the home where individuals, especially young children, may breathe the mercury vapors. However, the actual risk is unknown and varies depending upon the size of the home, the quantity of mercury present, the ventilation and air exchange rates, temperature, and other factors.

Because staff currently sees the sale of mercury for religious and ethnomedical uses in the home as a low risk problem, it would be very low on the Commission's enforcement priorities.

We commend you in your continuing efforts to address this issue at the local level.

Sincerely,

*Elizabeth Gonella for*

Robert G. Poth  
Director



DEPARTMENT  
OF HEALTH  
*The City of New York*

August 3, 1993

David N. Dinkins  
Mayor

Arnold P. Wendroff, PhD  
298 Marlborough Road  
Brooklyn, New York 11226

Margaret A. Hamburg, M.D.  
Commissioner

Dear Dr. Wendroff:

Enid L. Carruth, M.P.H.  
Deputy Commissioner

Your letter to Mayor Dinkins regarding mercury in botanicas has been forwarded to the Department of Health (DOH). I know that you have been in contact with the Mayor's office and with DOH in the past about this issue.

**Environmental Health  
Services**

In 1991, DOH took the following steps to address the potential public health hazards resulting from mercury use and distribution by botanicas:

- 1) DOH met with 20 botanica owners representing the five boroughs to inform them of the hazards of mercury and encourage them to participate in our education and assessment program as described below.
- 2) A fact sheet about mercury and its adverse health effects was designed in English and Spanish and handed out by AIDS outreach workers in Hispanic neighborhoods in Manhattan. In addition, batches of fact sheets were distributed to botanica owners for their customers.
- 3) A poster in Spanish about the hazards of mercury use was distributed to botanica owners who were asked to post it.
- 4) A press release in all major Spanish news papers publicized that DOH offered free testing for mercury in the body and referral of persons with elevated mercury levels in their body to Mt. Sinai Occupational Health Clinic. Only one person responded to this appeal, with a concern that was neither related to botanicas nor mercury in herbal medicine or religious use.
- 5) DOH visited six botanicas in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Shop owners said they had sold mercury

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in the past, but no longer did so. Using a direct reading instrument to detect evaporating mercury in the air, in all but one botanica no mercury was detected. In the sixth case, only trace amounts of mercury were detected, much less than would be detected if mercury recently had been poured or handled otherwise.

- 6) Free urine tests and cleanup kits for mercury spills were offered to botanica owners.

As Mayor Dinkins explained in his January 28, 1991 letter to you, the New York City Health Code requires that all cases of toxic poisonings are reported by laboratories and medical facilities to DOH. In addition, the New York State Health Code specifically mandates reporting of all cases of mercury poisoning (as indicated by a blood mercury level of 5 ng/ml or greater or a urine mercury level of 20 ng/ml or greater).

Reported cases of mercury poisoning are followed up by the City and/or State Health Departments to determine the source, and to take whatever steps are deemed necessary to reduce exposure and prevent poisoning from occurring in the future. However, to the best of my knowledge, to date, no cases of mercury poisoning from either the sale of mercury in botanicas or from religious usage have been reported to either the City or State Health Departments. If you are aware of specific cases, please bring it to our attention and we will follow up on them.

Thank you for your continued interest in this issue.

Sincerely,



Enid L. Carruth MPH  
Deputy Commissioner

c: Margaret A. Hamburg, MD



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September 3, 1993

Arnold Wendroff  
289 Marlborough Road  
Brooklyn, NY 11226

Dear Dr. Wendroff:

I want to apologize for not responding to your letter sooner but I was in the United States in the Summer taking workshops. I appreciate very much that you keep me up to date about your research with mercury.

About a year ago we started a project with the purpose of studying the selling of mercury in botánicas in Puerto Rico. The project was funded by the University of Puerto Rico (\$10,000). I am including a preliminary report of the findings of the study, although it is very incomplete because we have not finished the study. I hope to complete it at the end of December of 1993.

As you know, the selling of mercury botánicas was prohibited by the Puerto Rican government. However, we have found that a significant percent of the botánicas continue selling mercury. I consider that the community and the owners of botánicas need education about the harmful effects of mercury. The next stage of my research will be directed to address this important issue of educating the people.

If you have any questions about this report, feel free to call me. I want to ask you to keep this report confidential because it is preliminary and I do not want to share it with the public yet.

Sincerely,

*Mario A. Núñez Molina*  
Mario A. Núñez Molina  
Associate Professor

The  
City  
of  
New York



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

125 WORTH ST., NEW YORK, N.Y. 10013

Telephone:

December 22, 1993

VIA FAX

Arnold Wendroff, PhD  
544 8th Street  
Brooklyn, New York 11215-4201

Dear Dr. Wendroff:

Your letter of December 7, 1993 to Deputy Commissioner Enid Carruth and fax of yesterday has been forwarded to this unit. I am writing to let you know that we are currently reviewing your letter.

As you are undoubtedly aware, the issue of how best to identify cases of mercury overexposure from its sale and spiritual uses that do not result in acute poisonings and are not reported through the medical system is complex. Discussions are now underway at the New York City Department of Health to determine the best way to proceed. I anticipate that we will have a more detailed response early in the New Year.

Thank you for your continuing concern about this issue.

Sincerely,

*Susan Klitzman*

Susan Klitzman, DrPH  
Director, Environmental &  
Occupational Epidemiology Unit