Mercury Poisoning Project
Addresses Magico-Religious Uses

Dr. Arnold Wendroff of the
Mercury Poisoning Project in Brooklyn,
New York, has been working to alert
health authorities about traditional
practices involving mercury.

“Mercury is widely used by several
Hispanic and Caribbean ethnic groups
for magico-religious purposes,” Dr.
Wendroff said. People obtain the
mercury from shops called botanicas,
which sell mercury illegally.

Traditional uses of mercury
include placing it in candles or sprin-
kling it on floors. According to the
Agency for Toxic Substances and
Disease Registry, mercury is a naturally
occurring element that appears as a
silvery liquid. It volatilizes easily into the
air as odorless, colorless vapors that are
highly toxic and can be deadly.

Behaviors and attitudes
regarding environmental risks vary
among ethnic groups, Dr. Wendroff
said, and it’s not clear whether people
are unaware of mercury’s toxic nature
or whether they ignore the health risks
because of cultural norms.

For more information about the
Mercury Poisoning Project, call Dr.
Wendroff at 718-499-8336.