

# CLOSING THE GAP

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Office of Minority Health

Public Health Service

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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## **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 sprinkling 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.