From: ALEXIS CAIN[SMT:CAIN.ALEXIS@EPAMAIL.EPA.GOV]
Sent: Wednesday, July 16, 1997 10:12AM
To: Gilkeson, John; Swain, Ed; Brooks, Ned; Carey, Patrick;
gross.stephen@o1dep.state.pa.us; kratzers@deq.state.mi.us;
toulori@den.state.mi.us; huberk@dnr.state.wi.us; epamail@dnr.wisc.gov:
psmil@opn.dep.state.in.us
Cc: BIOUS.MICHAEL@EPAMAIL.EPA.GOV; MARTIG.ANTON@EPAMAIL.EPA.GOV;
ZAR.HOWARDEPAMAIL.EPA.GOV
Subject: Ritual Mercury Use Report, Chicago Dept. of Public Health

I have received a report on ritual use of mercury from the Office of
Hispanic Affairs, Chicago Department of Public Health. This report was
done under a grant from our Indoor Air Program. I will send copies

around in the next mailing of the Great Lakes Mercury Workgroup (if
you're not on the Workgroup mailing list, but would like a copy, let me
know). In the meantime, here are some highlights:

-- A survey was conducted of 79 individuals-- 55 female, 24 male-- who
are Hispanic clients of the Chicago Outreach Health Promotors or of the
CDPH Maternal and Child Program. Of these, 15 individuals-- 14 female, 1
male-- had used mercury for ritual purposes or folk remedies (a 16th
person had used mercury in high school science class).

-- Of the 79 surveyed, 48 were of Mexican origin, 14 Puerto Rican, 9
Guatemalan, 4 Salvadoran, 4 Other. Of the ritual/folk remedy users, 6
were Mexican, 6 Puerto Rican, 1 Guatemalan, 2 Salvadoran. Thus, 6
out of 14 Puerto Ricans surveyed had used mercury. Additional info on
age/educational background, etc. is available in the report, and in the raw
data available from CDPH.

-- Two of those surveyed use mercury at least once per month; three
others had used mercury during the last year.

-- Mercury was obtained primarily from Botanicas, but also from friends
and folk healers.

-- Methods of use include carrying the mercury in a purse or amulet,
mixing it with water used for house cleaning, putting it in bath water,
putting it in a glass of water kept under the bed, pouring it onto a candle
and burning it, swallowing it in a capsule or drink.
16 Botanicos were visited, all of which sold mercury. Only four of the botanicos included a warning label with the mercury.

The Report recommends education to the at-risk population, training of health providers regarding mercury use and toxicity, inclusion of mercury use as a component in health histories and assessments of Hispanic medical patients; support of the traditional use Botanicas, along with education of proprietors, folk healers and consumers about the dangers of mercury; examination of options for regulating botanicas--i.e. requiring a license and prohibiting the sale of toxic substances.

Apparently, the CDPH ran into some resistance during the course of doing their research from community health people who were concerned that this effort would lead to shutting down botanicos, which some see as an important community resource. Clearly, raises some fears and concerns in parts of the Hispanic community.

The Chicago Department of Public Health plans to follow up with publicity in local Spanish-language media, outreach to the public and health providers, and also with an effort to assess the possible health effects of mercury use on the specific individuals identified as users in the surveys.

I think that this report provides important evidence that there is a significant issue of ritual mercury use in the Chicago Hispanic population. The data in the report could be useful for efforts to target research/outreach in other areas with significant Hispanic populations.