

Q & A: Phasing Out Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices

Are Alternatives to Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices Accurate?

The WHO Technical Guidance document "[Replacement of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers in health care](#)⁽¹⁾," published in 2011 concludes that "alternatives to mercury-containing thermometers and sphygmomanometers are available, and are accurate and practical in clinical settings."

Are Alternatives to Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices Affordable?

[The experience of hospitals and health systems and studies conducted in numerous developing countries](#)⁽²⁾ have found that while an individual digital thermometer is more expensive than a mercurial device, given much higher breakage rates of the mercury thermometer, within a year hospitals are often saving money. Savings have also been found when substituting sphygmomanometers.

What is the World Health Organization's Policy?

In 2005 WHO issued a [Policy Paper](#)⁽³⁾ calling for support for short, medium and long-term solutions to the issue of mercury in health care. In the short-term WHO called for the safe management of mercury waste. In the medium term it called for the progressive replacement of mercury-based medical devices

with alternatives. The long-term solution proposed by WHO includes "a ban for use of mercury containing devices and effectively promote the use of mercury free alternatives."

What Other Policies Exist to Substitute Mercury-based Medical Devices with Affordable, Accurate Alternatives?

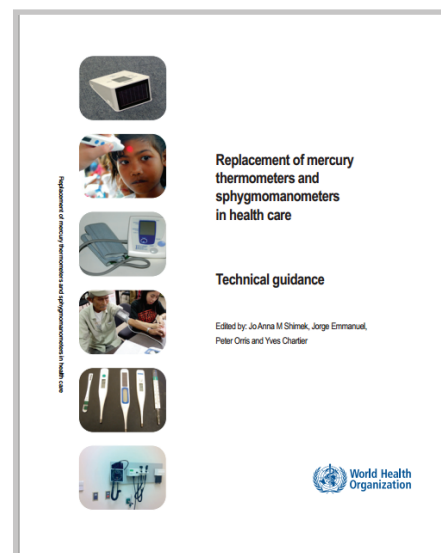
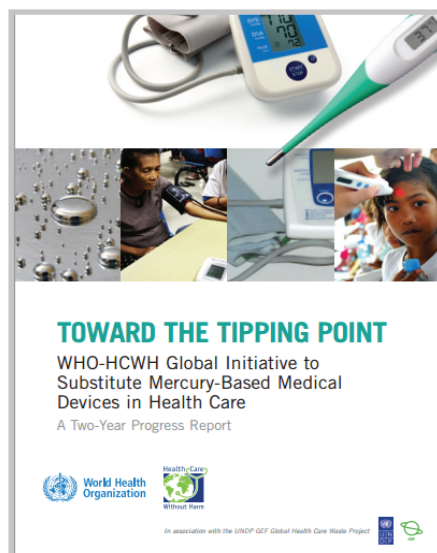
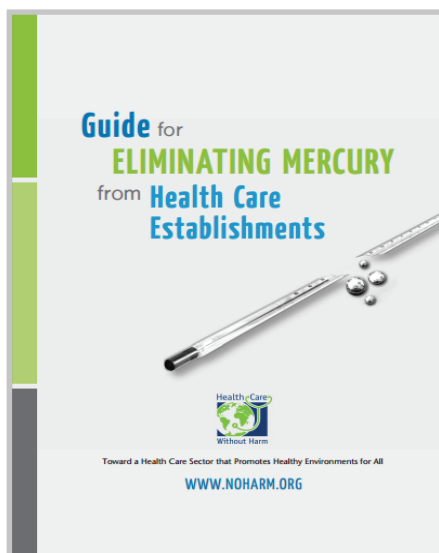
Many countries from every continent have developed substitution policies, including but not limited to:

Argentina – In February 2009, the Argentine Ministry of Health issued a [resolution 139/2009](#)⁽⁴⁾ calling for an end to purchase of mercury medical devices in all Argentine hospitals. In February 2010, the Ministry of Health of Argentina published an [Administrative Order](#)⁽⁵⁾ banning mercury sphygmomanometers.

Brazil – In 2010, the Health Secretariat of São Paulo State [banned](#)⁽⁶⁾ the purchase and the use of any equipment containing mercury in public hospitals and other health services. The Santa Catarina State government has also [banned](#)⁽⁷⁾ mercury thermometers in hospital systems and pharmacies.

Chile – In April 2011, the Ministry of Health Issued a [National Guidance](#)⁽⁸⁾ for Mercury-free Health Care.

Cuba – Since the 1980s, Cuba has replaced most of its mercury sphygmomanometers with [aneroid devices](#)⁽⁹⁾.



The **European Union** [banned mercury thermometers](#)⁽¹⁰⁾ for home and health care use in 2008 and will enact a [sphygmomanometer ban](#)⁽¹¹⁾ with extremely limited exceptions in 2014.

India – In May 2010, India's Central Government issued [guidelines](#)⁽¹²⁾ to phase-out mercury containing equipment from all Government-run Hospitals. In Delhi, [all government-run hospitals](#)⁽¹³⁾ have stopped purchasing new mercury-based medical devices.

Mongolia – The Ministry of Health and the National Emergency Management Agency of Mongolia issued a [Joint Order](#)⁽¹⁴⁾ to "ban further procurement of the mercury containing thermometer, sphygmomanometer and dental amalgam, beginning January 15, 2011.

Philippines – In 2008, the Philippines issued and subsequently implemented an [Administrative Order](#)⁽¹⁵⁾ calling for the phase-out of mercury based medical devices across the country.

South Africa – The Province of Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa has issued and is implementing [directives](#)⁽¹⁶⁾ banning the purchase of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers. In 2011, South Africa's [Department of Environmental Affairs](#) called⁽¹⁷⁾ on the country's Ministry of Health to issue a directive immediately suspending the purchase of mercury-based thermometers, blood pressure devices and dental amalgam.

Taiwan Republic of China – In March 2008, the Environmental Protection Administration announced a [national policy](#)⁽¹⁸⁾ to phase-out of mercury thermometers.

United States – The United States has virtually phased out mercury-based medical devices. With [bans or severe restrictions in the majority of US states](#)⁽¹⁹⁾. It is nearly impossible to purchase a mercury thermometer in the United States today.

The **World Medical Association** passed a [resolution](#)⁽¹⁹⁾ in 2008 calling for the substitution of mercury-based medical devices with safer alternatives.

What Position Should Countries Take at INC5 Regarding Mercury-based Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices?

Countries should support the listing of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers in Annex C - Mercury Added Products - of the treaty with a timetable for rapid phase-out that includes the manufacture, import or export of mercury-added products with no exemptions. Mercury free alternatives to these products are already globally widely available and phase-out can be achieved within clear and reasonable time frames that should be agreed to in Annex C and Article 6.

References

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HCWH International Coordination
Tamborini 2838
1429 Buenos Aires, Argentina
ph/fax: +54 11 4545 7204
e: alejandra@hcwh.org
www.noharm.org/global

HCWH Southeast Asia
Unit 330, Eagle Court Condominium,
26 Matalino Street, Brgy. Central Diliman,
Quezon City 1100 Philippines
ph: +63 2 9287572
fax: +63 2 9262649
e: sonia@hcwh.org
www.noharm.org/seasia

HCWH Latin America
Tamborini 2838
1429 Buenos Aires, Argentina
ph/fax: +54 11 4545 7204
e: info@saludsindanio.org
www.saludsindanio.org

HCWH Europe
Rue de la Pepiniere B1000
Brussels, Belgium
ph: +49 6224 994871
ph: +32 2503 0481
e: anja.leetz@hcwh.org
www.noharm.org/europe

HCWH USA and Canada
12355 Sunrise Valley Dr., Suite 680
Reston, VA 20191 United States of America
ph: +1 703 860 9790
fax: +1 703 860 9795
e: cfunkhouser@hcwh.org
www.noharm.org/us_canada