Public Health Association of Australia submission on national phase-down of mercury – Ratification of the Minamata Convention on Mercury

Contact for recipient:
Chemicals Management and Standards
Department of the Environment and Energy
A: GPO Box 787, Canberra ACT 2601
E: minamata@environment.gov.au

Contact for PHAA:
Michael Moore – Chief Executive Officer
A: 20 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600
E: phaa@phaa.net.au T: (02) 6285 2373

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Introduction

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia working to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It is the pre-eminent voice for the public’s health in Australia. The PHAA works to ensure that the public’s health is improved through sustained and determined efforts of the Board, the National Office, the State and Territory Branches, the Special Interest Groups and members.

The efforts of the PHAA are enhanced by our vision for a healthy Australia and by engaging with like-minded stakeholders in order to build coalitions of interest that influence public opinion, the media, political parties and governments.

Health is a human right, a vital resource for everyday life, and key factor in sustainability. Health equity and inequity do not exist in isolation from the conditions that underpin people’s health. The health status of all people is impacted by the social, cultural, political, environmental and economic determinants of health. Specific focus on these determinants is necessary to reduce the unfair and unjust effects of conditions of living that cause poor health and disease. These determinants underpin the strategic direction of the Association.

All members of the Association are committed to better health outcomes based on these principles.

Vision for a healthy population

A healthy region, a healthy nation, healthy people: living in an equitable society underpinned by a well-functioning ecosystem and a healthy environment, improving and promoting health for all.

Mission for the Public Health Association of Australia

As the leading national peak body for public health representation and advocacy, to drive better health outcomes through increased knowledge, better access and equity, evidence informed policy and effective population-based practice in public health.

PHAA comments on a national phase-down of mercury

PHAA welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Exposure Draft – Final Regulation Impact Statement (ED RIS) and costs and benefits (CBA) on the ratification of the Minamata Convention on Mercury. The reduction of social and health inequities should be an over-arching goal of national policy and recognised as a key measure of our progress as a society. The Australian Government, in collaboration with the States/Territories, should outline a comprehensive national cross-government framework on reducing health inequities. All public health activities and related government policy should be directed towards reducing social and health inequity nationally and, where possible, internationally.
The PHAA welcomes and supports the recommendation to ratify the Minamata Convention with Option 4, which represents the greatest net benefit to human health and the environment. Australia’s proposed ratification of this important Convention is long overdue, after becoming a Signatory in October 2013. This is especially significant in Australia, where, as noted in the Regulation Impact Statement, the mercury pollution is approximately double the global average on a per-capita basis. A particular concern is the build-up of mercury residues in landfills and the subsequent leaching into land and waterways. The bio-accumulation in fish is one of the more serious risks to people, including pregnant mothers and babies.

The PHAA notes that industry and agriculture cause the largest mercury releases to land, air and water in Australia. The decision to prepare a global legally binding instrument on mercury was made in February 2009 by the United Nations Environment Programme, allowing ample time for the industry and agriculture sectors in Australia to be aware of these global moves to reduce mercury contamination. Therefore, the sectors should not require tax-payer incentives to reduce their pollution.

Adequate monitoring and regulation will be required to ensure that the ratification of the Convention leads to a smooth phase-out. The Federal, State and Territory Government agencies will need to be properly funded for these tasks, and regular reporting to the community.

PHAA supports the ratification of the Minamata Convention with Option 4. However, we are keen to ensure proper monitoring and reporting in line with this submission. We are particularly keen that the following points are highlighted:

- The Industry and Agriculture sectors in Australia have had ample time to prepare for the phase-out and should not require tax-payer incentives;
- Adequate funding of Federal, State and Territory Government agencies will be required to ensure monitoring, regulation and regular reporting to the community;

The PHAA appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and provide support for the ratification of the Minamata Convention with Option 4.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information or have any queries in relation to this submission.

Michael Moore BA, Dip Ed, MPH
Chief Executive Officer
Public Health Association of Australia

Peter Tait
PHAA Convenor
Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group