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# How Should a Fever Mercury Thermometer be Disposed of? A Survey of Those Likely to be Asked

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**ABSTRACT.** The American Academy of Pediatrics' recent technical report entitled "Mercury in the Environment: Implications for Pediatricians" was widely reported on by the news media. After the media reports, the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System experienced a notable increase in the volume of calls on this topic. We surveyed local, county, and state health officers who would likely be contacted by citizens with the question: "How should a fever mercury thermometer be disposed of?" Our initial contacts with health officers corroborated our caller's account: a lack of uniformity of response. This led us to question if there was any consensus in advice being offered to the public at large. *Pediatrics* 2002;109(5). URL: <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/109/5/e71>; mercury, thermometer, disposal.

ABBREVIATION. AAP, American Academy of Pediatrics.

Poison control centers across the nation frequently receive inquiries regarding mercury thermometers. Common situations that they are presented with include:

- a child has just swallowed part of a fever thermometer;
- a thermometer has broken in a body orifice; or
- an individual is unsure how to safely dispose of a thermometer.

The American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) recent technical report entitled "Mercury in the Environment: Implications for Pediatricians" was widely reported on by the news media.<sup>1</sup> After the media reports, the New Jersey Poison Information and Education System experienced a notable increase in the volume of calls on this topic. The center's interest regarding correct disposal of mercury thermometers was aroused during this period when one caller gave an account of having received mixed messages from a number of local officials on the subject. We surveyed local, county, and state health officers who would likely be contacted by citizens with the question: "How should a fever mercury thermometer be

disposed of?" Our initial contacts with health officers corroborated our caller's account: a lack of uniformity of response. This led us to question if there was any consensus in advice being offered to the public at large.

## METHODS

The following groups were asked how to dispose of a typical fever thermometer that contains mercury:

- county and local health departments;
- county hazardous waste facilities;
- recycling centers; and
- state official(s).

The agencies contacted represented different geographical areas of our state. A total of 80 groups were contacted by phone to ask the question. Responses were categorized as follows:

1. Throw it in the regular trash.
2. Take it to a specific site for hazardous waste collection.
3. Call another facility/agency for guidance on how to dispose of it. When it was suggested that we contact another agency, an attempt to do this was made and the response noted for the appropriate agency/facility.

## RESULTS

No consistent correct response was offered by agencies contacted. Forty-five percent of those contacted recommended that the thermometers be thrown in the regular trash (Table 1).

## DISCUSSION

The release of the statement by the AAP and the resultant media attention, plus the increased interest of the public of protecting the environment, will no doubt produce an increase in the interest of how to dispose of the various forms/sources of mercury in the home. With the AAP encouraging the phase-out of mercury-based thermometers, health care professionals must be aware of proper disposal technique. Unfortunately, although most of the health care system and the environment community believes that mercury should not be released into the environment for fear it will damage both the wildlife and

TABLE 1. Disposal Methods That Were Suggested

| Agency Type               | Total Called | Throw in Trash | Take to Specific Site | Call Another Group |
|---------------------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| City recycling            | 25           | 12             | 6                     | 7                  |
| Local health office       | 25           | 14             | 2                     | 9                  |
| County health office      | 20           | 7              | 4                     | 9                  |
| County hazardous waste    | 9            | 3              | 6                     | 0                  |
| New Jersey state official | 1            | 0              | 1                     | 0                  |
| Totals                    | 80           | 36             | 19                    | 25                 |

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eventually humans, as seen in our survey, no uniform advice is offered by county and local health departments, county hazardous waste facilities, and recycling centers. A uniform approach to disposal of all mercury-containing products must occur if there is to be an effective way to keep mercury out of the environment. We encourage those wishing to dispose of mercury thermometers to contact their local community to determine what agency is responsible for disposal of hazardous material in that municipality.

Public health officials and solid waste management companies should be uniform in their approach to interdict any mercury that otherwise would be added to the environment.

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#### REFERENCE

1. Goldman LR, Shannon MW, and the Committee on Environmental Health. Technical report: mercury in the environment: implications for pediatricians. *Pediatrics*. 2001;108:197–205

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