

Partnership: Health Care Without Harm and UNEP

Health Care Without Harm, an international NGO with more than 440 members in 52 countries, entered into a partnership with UNEP in December 2005. Health Care Without Harm works to protect health and the environment by reducing pollution in the health care sector. The partnership aims to promote alternatives to mercury in the health care sector in developing countries. The partnership includes organizing four regional workshops aiming to raise awareness and promote change, facilitating the formation of national and/or regional working groups to build capacity and develop strategies to substantially reduce and ultimately eliminate mercury use from the health care sector, encouraging the launch of mercury-free health care pledges for specific hospitals and clinics and producing and publishing a final report based on these activities.

UNEP provided \$90,000 funding, and Health Care Without Harm obtained significant co-financing to organize two workshops in 2006. The first took place in January in Manila, the Philippines. It covered the South East Asia region and was attended by more than 200 health care leaders, government officials, and NGOs from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, China and Vietnam. The second workshop took place in August in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It covered the Latin America region and was attended by more than 150 health care leaders, government officials and NGOs from Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba and Mexico. Both events were sponsored by Ministries of Health and Environment, as well as local health care institutions in each country. Each event included participation from UNEP, the World Health Organization, the Swedish Chemicals Inspectorate and from resource people from Europe, India, the United States, Canada and elsewhere. Each event issued a final declaration with similar conclusions that called for progressive phase-out of mercury-based medical devices and their substitution with mercury-free devices. Notably, the final declaration from each event also called for action to negotiate “a binding international instrument to substantially reduce global supply and demand of mercury.”

Subsequent to each workshop, numerous health care institutions have moved to begin phasing out mercury in their operations. The Philippines Ministry of Health is preparing an Administrative Order to phase out mercury in health care nationally. In the lead-up to the Latin America conference, the Buenos Aires city government committed to phase-out mercury-based medical devices in the 33 hospitals under its purview. Greater details on the outcomes of both events are available at www.mercuryfreehealthcare.org, www.saludsindanio.org, and www.noharm.org. Next steps for the partnership, and for HCWH's overall efforts to eliminate mercury in the health care sector in developing countries are to obtain the funding to organize the third workshop in South Africa in 2007, as well as resources to organize follow-up activities to the first two workshops, including national seminars in Malaysia, Vietnam, Brazil and Mexico.