Severe mercury pollution occurred in Minamata in Japan, in the 1960s. Unfortunately, the children were the ones that were the most affected. Many were born crippled, blind, deaf, or paralysed, or had spasmodic cramps. A special hospital was built for the victims of this disaster. I met many of those patients during my time in Japan. Some of them have always been in a wheelchair, because they were born paralysed owing to the effects of methylmercury.

Methylmercury is a toxic substance that bioaccumulates in fish, especially those we like to eat such as tuna. Once the mercury is in our system, it can be transported to the brain, where it can result in mental conditions, especially in children, whose brains are still in development.

I recently received a statement from the Swedish authorities stating that they will not admit to health problems caused by amalgam, because they fear that people will start to claim reimbursements from the government, because they once said it was safe. I was also quite disappointed by the European Commission hearing last year on how to handle amalgam and whether it should be mandatory for all member states to have amalgam separators. There were two different committees—the Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks and the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks—working on these matters and, in my opinion, both did a very poor job. They looked at the situation in Sweden, where amalgam separators are practically mandatory, and assumed this was the case for all countries in the European Union.

The conclusion was that no further legislation is needed. I was astonished when I saw that they made this decision without any proper scientific evaluation. Even the authorities here in Sweden got quite upset about it, but their protest was not given consideration.

"Amalgam separators must be mandatory"

Interview with Assoc. Prof. Lars Hylander, Uppsala University, Sweden

Mercury has been used for millennia in many applications, primarily in artisanal mining & as an electrode in the chloralkali industry. Today, for many people exposure to mercury results from their amalgam fillings. With new regulations on amalgam use in Europe and the United States, environmental aspects of the toxic metal have to be taken into consideration. DTI editors Daniela Zimmermann and Claudia Sawiczek spoke with Lars Hylander, Associate Professor at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, about how amalgam waste affects the environment and how it could be prevented.

DTI: Dentists have been using amalgam as filling material for a long time, but it seems that they do not know that much about its effects on the environment.

Prof. Hylander: The problem with amalgam is that the metallic mercury, which is part of the filling, is transformed into methylmercury by bacteria in water. Methylmercury is a toxic substance that bioaccumulates in fish, especially those we like to eat such as tuna. Once the mercury is in our system, it can be transported to the brain, where it can result in mental conditions, especially in children, whose brains are still in development.

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Nowadays, dental offices and clinics are the top point contributors to mercury pollution rich country, we find it too expensive to put cleaning devices on all crematoria. This is not very responsible. Many varieties of amalgam—mercury-free fillings are available today and, they are more expensive than amalgam, if aesthetic aspects, the risk of cracked teeth in large amalgam fillings and environmental costs are not considered.

Why isn't this topic on the political agenda?

There is much lobbying to avoid bringing this topic into the political agenda. For example, I recently received a statement from the Swedish authorities stating that they will not admit to health problems caused by amalgam, because they fear that people will start to claim reimbursements from the government, because they once said it was safe. I was also quite disappointed by the European Commission hearing last year on how to handle amalgam and whether it should be mandatory for all member states to have amalgam separators. There were two different committees—the Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks and the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks—working on these matters and, in my opinion, both did a very poor job. They looked at the situation in Sweden, where amalgam separators are practically mandatory, and assumed this was the case for all countries in the European Union.

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