

Advisory Committee on Mercury Pollution

Meeting #98: April 19, 2010

Time: 9:30 am to noon

Location: Laundry Building Conference Room, Waterbury State Office Complex
Waterbury, Vermont

MINUTES

Members Present:

Bill Bress, Vermont Department of Health
Gary Gulka, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Environmental Assistance Office
Jennifer Holliday, Chittenden Solid Waste District (via telephone)
Neil Kamman, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Water Quality Division
Representative Jim McCullough

Guests Present:

Matt Levin, Vermonters for a Clean Environment
Chris Finley, Immunization Chief, Vermont Department of Health

The Committee members and interested parties gathered at the Waterbury State Office Complex, Laundry Building Conference Room and via telephone. Neil Kamman called the meeting to order.

Agenda Item 1

Accept minutes from February 8 meeting

The draft minutes were approved as drafted with a minor editorial change.

Agenda Item 2

Public comment/committee member concerns

Neil Kamman said that he received a response from Senator Leahy's office in regard to the letter from the Advisory Committee on supporting the Mercury Monitoring Act. The response was not on point – referencing the Senator's support for a different bill – the Clean Water Restoration Act (S.787).

Agenda Item 3

Legislative update

Representative McCullough indicated that a salvage yard bill (S.237) has passed the Senate and is moving toward second reading in the House. The bill seems to have unilateral support (note: this bill would address the management of mercury auto switches).

Representative McCullough also reported that H.484, dealing with toxic chemicals in children's products did not progress in this legislative session. He said that there was a joint resolution passed that supported action at the federal level on toxic chemical regulation.

Jen Holliday reported on the status of the mercury lamp bill, H.94, passed by the House last year, and amended by the Senate Natural Resources Committee, as S.232. The bill has received testimony in the Senate Natural Resources Committee this session; however, it is doubtful that it will be moved due to the pending end of the legislative session. She indicated that if a bill does not pass this session, that any bill passing next year will leave very little time for implementation in order to avoid interruption to lamp recycling funding.

A question was asked about the current sunset date of the Advisory Committee. Gary Gulka indicated that the sunset date is January 1, 2015.

Agenda Item 4

Finalize committee work plan for 2010

Mercury emissions from crematoria were discussed. The Committee commented that there may be little new information to inform the discussion. Neil Kamman commented that the Department of Environmental Conservation's Air Pollution Control Division has had staffing reductions in permitting and may have limited capability to explore the issue further. Matt Levin commented that without a technically and economically feasible solution identified, further progress will be limited. Gary Gulka indicated that he will raise the issue with the New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers' Mercury Task Force next month and report back to the Advisory Committee. Neil Kamman suggested that the Mercury Task Force be involved with an updated mercury emissions inventory on crematoria.

Neil Kamman asked about the responsible parties for the mercury outreach activities on the work plan. These activities are largely the responsibility of VDH and DEC. VDH's sanitation program would be providing mercury in fish posters to grocers. DEC is responsible for thermostats, public access area postings, and lamp outreach. The Advisory Committee has been the responsible entity for determining the public dissemination of the dental amalgam fact sheet. Gary Gulka indicated that the dental amalgam fact sheet has been posted on the mercvt.org web site and that the next step was a press release from the Advisory Committee. He also indicated that another next step of the Advisory Committee was to determine how to further disseminate the fact sheet to the health care community.

The Advisory Committee decided that it would remove a special event for the 100th meeting from the work plan. Instead, it was suggested that part of the meeting be used to review the accomplishments of the Committee since 1998. Representative McCullough suggested that a joint legislative resolution next session would be in order to commemorate the mercury success stories over the years. It was also suggested that next year's report to the legislature could commemorate the work of the Committee and the successes in mercury reduction since 1998. This suggestion was supported by the Committee.

The Committee approved the Advisory Committee work plan with the changes noted.

It was suggested and agreed to include mercury lamp recycling funding on the work plan for September and November meetings. The Committee agreed that they would like to hear from DEC and the other stakeholders on the status of finding a sustainable funding source for residential and small business lamp collection. The Committee agreed to send a letter to DEC and other stakeholders requesting a progress report.

Agenda Item 5

Thimerosal discussion with Department of Health

Chris Finley, Immunization Chief, VDH

Chris Finley, Immunization Chief with VDH, provided some background information on vaccinations. She indicated that Vermont ranks third from last in the nation in the rate of childhood vaccinations (64%). She reminded the Committee that pediatric vaccines do not contain thimerosal; the only vaccines containing thimerosal are multi-dose influenza vaccines and H1N1 influenza vaccine.

VDH recently ordered influenza vaccine for next flu season. She indicated that VDH estimates the amounts that will be needed physicians and health care providers. These requests are received in August. Last year 47,000 flu vaccines were ordered; of these 19,000 were multi-dose. The request for multi-dose flu vaccine was more than was actually received. Multi-dose vials of vaccine are easier to store and cost slightly less than single-dose vaccines (\$8.27 versus \$9.10). 64% of the H1N1 vaccines received last year were multi-dose. In the beginning of the season, many of the doses of H1N1 were preservative-free flu mist.

Ms. Finley expressed concern that the thimerosal issue in some flu vaccines may be misinterpreted by the public and may contribute to the low vaccination rate for pediatric vaccines. She indicated that, through the Childhood Improvement Project, there will be four or five focus group meetings in the near future, with people that choose to not vaccinate their children, to get a better understanding of the reasons for this.

Matt Levin commented that he is aware of situations where the general public has been frustrated when calling physicians' offices or VDH offices when inquiring about preservative-free vaccines. When seeking information on how to obtain thimerosal-free vaccines, there are instances reported where the public has been told that thimerosal is safe, and they are not receiving the information that they really wanted. Neil Kamman echoed a similar personal experience. Chris Finley described a situation where she made numerous calls to help a member of the public find preservative-free vaccine, but was thwarted in her attempts to find unexpired preservative-free vaccine.

Lack of refrigeration space in physicians' offices was discussed. VDH generally knows the amount of refrigeration space in physicians' offices and they try to dispense an 8-week supply of

vaccine. Single dose vaccines come in packages of 5-10 doses; they take up more storage space than multi-dose vials, though the difference is not great.

There was a suggestion to explore strategies to get larger refrigerators into physicians' offices, including using any rebates offered by Efficiency Vermont for energy efficient refrigerators. Ms. Finley indicated that VDH disallows storage in small, dorm-style refrigerators.

Ms. Finley stated that physicians' offices are not charged for the vaccines. Legislation was passed in Vermont for a two-year pilot program in which insurance providers pay the cost of children's immunizations for insured children. Insurance providers are generally in support of this.

Matt Levin asked what would happen if multi-dose was not a choice for physicians' offices on the order form. Ms. Finley indicated that VDH can review the form that will go out in August. Ms. Finley indicated that she would be willing to share focus group results with the Advisory Committee.

There was a discussion of the toxicity of ethyl mercury. Bill Bress indicated that there is a dearth of information on toxicity. He said that it may be excreted more readily from the body, but it may also be more readily converted to elemental mercury where it can be absorbed into the brain.

Bill Bress stated that the Advisory Committee is sensitive to how its legislative reports could have negative effects on something such as pediatric vaccinations and wishes to avoid this.

Ms. Finley indicated that there is now more information on the VDH web site on thimerosal – a link to Centers for Disease Control fact sheet. She said further improvements to the web site are in the offing.

Neil Kamman stated that he feels there needs to be further public education on the categories of vaccines that do not contain thimerosal. Similarly, he said that people may avoid eating fish altogether, rather than restricting the consumption of fish with higher levels of mercury.

Ms. Finley stated her opinion that the general public should have a choice when it comes to thimerosal or thimerosal-free vaccine, and that this is an important issue.

Ms. Finley stated that disposal of expired vaccine, both with and without thimerosal, is being handled through CDC in a centralized collection system. In Vermont, there are drop-off locations, or VDH staff will make direct pickups of unused vaccines at physicians' offices. VDH also needs to account for unused vaccine.

The Advisory Committee thanked Ms. Finley for the discussion. It was decided that the Committee would ask for an update of the focus group meetings at the June meeting. The Committee also would follow up on VDH's willingness to consider further reductions in multi-dose vaccine orders.

Agenda Item 6

Program updates – thermostat recycling, lamp recycling, outreach to sensitive populations, dental amalgam fact sheet

It was suggested that the next step on the dental amalgam fact sheet is a press release. It was suggested that the Committee consider disseminating the fact sheet via email – to physicians' offices and other health care providers. Gary Gulka will determine status of email lists that can be utilized and will follow up with Michael Bender on a press release.

Gary Gulka provided an update to the Committee on progress to develop a methodology to determine the capture rate of mercury thermostats. He said that he has participated in a dialogue with the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) which is working with states to help them with this. At present, PSI is working with some states to help them determine the percentage of thermostats being removed/replaced that contain mercury. This work is being accomplished by surveying HVAC contractors in certain states to provide an estimate. Vermont is considering similar survey work. Mr. Gulka indicated that he will communicate with interested stakeholders and seek comment on the methodology being developed. There is a requirement in the legislation to develop this methodology by July 1.

Bill Bress indicated that VDH will be reprinting its mercury in fish blue booklet. Matt Levin suggested that a URL for VDH be included.

Gary Gulka indicated that DEC hopes to have mercury in fish posters placed at state fishing and boating access areas this spring.

The mercury fish cards are also being revised and reprinted this spring.

Agenda Item 7

Set next meeting date and agenda

The following agenda items were identified for the June meeting:

- Mercury emissions from crematoria
- Committee appointments/reappointments
- Legislative updates
- Dental amalgam fact sheet – public dissemination
- Update on thimerosal in vaccines – VDH
- Mercury outreach and program updates

Summary of Motions and Actions

Gary Gulka indicated that he will raise the issue with the New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers' Mercury Task Force next month and report back to the Advisory Committee.

The Committee approved the Advisory Committee work plan with the changes noted.

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