

## Q & A: Phasing Out Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices

### Are Alternatives to Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices Accurate?

The WHO Technical Guidance document "[Replacement of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers in health care](#)<sup>(1)</sup>," published in 2011 concludes that "alternatives to mercury-containing thermometers and sphygmomanometers are available, and are accurate and practical in clinical settings."

### Are Alternatives to Mercury Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices Affordable?

[The experience of hospitals and health systems and studies conducted in numerous developing countries](#)<sup>(2)</sup> have found that while an individual digital thermometer is more expensive than a mercurial device, given much higher breakage rates of the mercury thermometer, within a year hospitals are often saving money. Savings have also been found when substituting sphygmomanometers.

### What is the World Health Organization's Policy?

In 2005 WHO issued a [Policy Paper](#)<sup>(3)</sup> calling for support for short, medium and long-term solutions to the issue of mercury in health care. In the short-term WHO called for the safe management of mercury waste. In the medium term it called for the progressive replacement of mercury-based medical devices

with alternatives. The long-term solution proposed by WHO includes "a ban for use of mercury containing devices and effectively promote the use of mercury free alternatives."

### What Other Policies Exist to Substitute Mercury-based Medical Devices with Affordable, Accurate Alternatives?

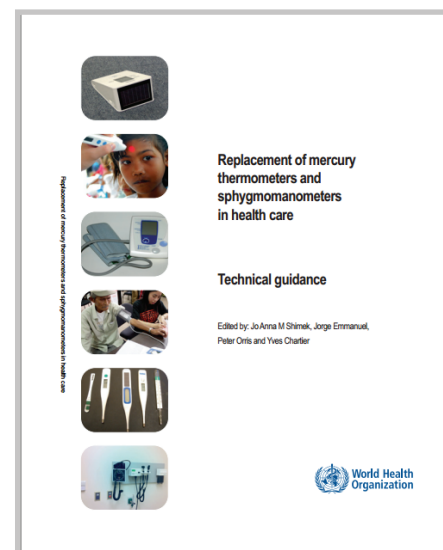
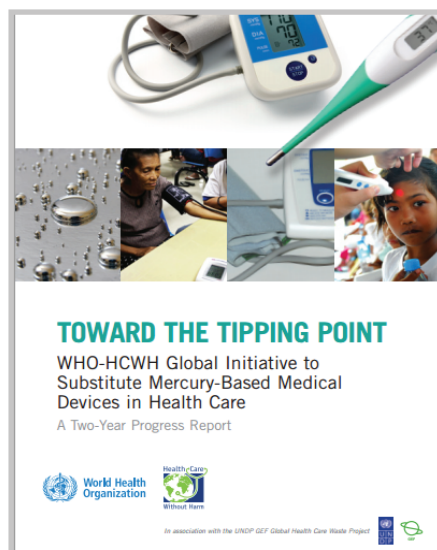
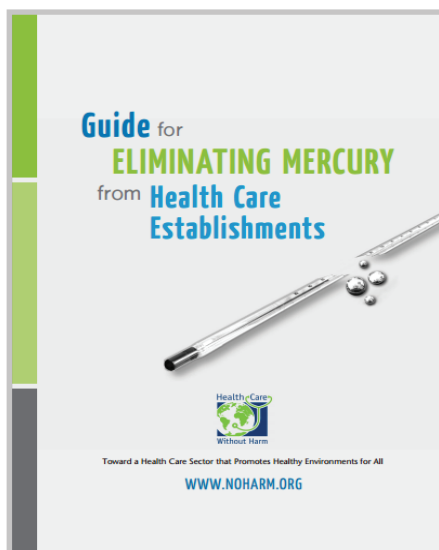
Many countries from every continent have developed substitution policies, including but not limited to:

**Argentina** – In February 2009, the Argentine Ministry of Health issued a [resolution 139/2009](#)<sup>(4)</sup> calling for an end to purchase of mercury medical devices in all Argentine hospitals. In February 2010, the Ministry of Health of Argentina published an [Administrative Order](#)<sup>(5)</sup> banning mercury sphygmomanometers.

**Brazil** – In 2010, the Health Secretariat of São Paulo State [banned](#)<sup>(6)</sup> the purchase and the use of any equipment containing mercury in public hospitals and other health services. The Santa Catarina State government has also [banned](#)<sup>(7)</sup> mercury thermometers in hospital systems and pharmacies.

**Chile** – In April 2011, the Ministry of Health Issued a [National Guidance](#)<sup>(8)</sup> for Mercury-free Health Care.

**Cuba** – Since the 1980s, Cuba has replaced most of its mercury sphygmomanometers with [aneroid devices](#)<sup>(9)</sup>.



The **European Union** [banned mercury thermometers](#)<sup>(10)</sup> for home and health care use in 2008 and will enact a [sphygmomanometer ban](#)<sup>(11)</sup> with extremely limited exceptions in 2014.

**India** – In May 2010, India's Central Government issued [guidelines](#)<sup>(12)</sup> to phase-out mercury containing equipment from all Government-run Hospitals. In Delhi, [all government-run hospitals](#)<sup>(13)</sup> have stopped purchasing new mercury-based medical devices.

**Mongolia** – The Ministry of Health and the National Emergency Management Agency of Mongolia issued a [Joint Order](#)<sup>(14)</sup> to "ban further procurement of the mercury containing thermometer, sphygmomanometer and dental amalgam, beginning January 15, 2011.

**Philippines** – In 2008, the Philippines issued and subsequently implemented an [Administrative Order](#)<sup>(15)</sup> calling for the phase-out of mercury based medical devices across the country.

**South Africa** – The Province of Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa has issued and is implementing [directives](#)<sup>(16)</sup> banning the purchase of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers. In 2011, South Africa's [Department of Environmental Affairs called](#)<sup>(17)</sup> on the country's Ministry of Health to issue a directive immediately suspending the purchase of mercury-based thermometers, blood pressure devices and dental amalgam.

**Taiwan Republic of China** – In March 2008, the Environmental Protection Administration announced a [national policy](#)<sup>(18)</sup> to phase-out of mercury thermometers.

**United States** – The United States has virtually phased out mercury-based medical devices. With [bans or severe restrictions in the majority of US states](#)<sup>(19)</sup>. It is nearly impossible to purchase a mercury thermometer in the United States today.

The **World Medical Association** passed a [resolution](#)<sup>(19)</sup> in 2008 calling for the substitution of mercury-based medical devices with safer alternatives.

## What Position Should Countries Take at INC5 Regarding Mercury-based Thermometers and Blood Pressure Devices?

Countries should support the listing of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers in Annex C - Mercury Added-Products - of the treaty with a timetable for rapid phase-out that includes the manufacture, import or export of mercury-added products with no exemptions. Mercury free alternatives to these products are already globally widely available and phase-out can be achieved within clear and reasonable time frames that should be agreed to in Annex C and Article 6.

### References

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