

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

June 10, 2004

New Thermometers for Old

Several months ago I wrote about the hazard of mercury in our environment and asked if readers still used fever thermometers that contain mercury. The town and several environmental organizations have invited us to turn in the old thermometers, replacing them with new digital models, but I had missed those opportunities and thought some of you might be in the same situation.

This month I am following up that earlier column by offering a thermometer exchange at the Longmeadow Recycling Center. On June 19, between 9:00 and noon, you can turn in a mercury thermometer at the center and take home a new digital replacement. Health Care for All and the Longmeadow Health and Environmental Initiative have provided the new thermometers, and the Recycling Center will take care of safe handling of old thermometers. In addition to being easier to read, the new thermometer will remove the risk of mercury contamination that would result from a broken thermometer.

If you still have an old thermometer, you may want to know why you should exchange it. After all, many of us handled mercury in chemistry class and even picked up the mysterious liquid metal after a thermometer broke.

Mercury once to provided fascinating entertainment in high school chemistry class. It rolled around in your hand, broke into small beads if dropped, and bonded with metal jewelry if you weren't careful. But that was before its presence in the environment was identified as a serious health risk. That risk has changed the attitude we take to mercury and led to alternative methods of doing the household tasks once performed using mercury.

The highest risk from mercury comes long after it has served its useful purpose, when it is released into the atmosphere either from smokestacks or wastewater runoff. It eventually falls to the bed of rivers or lakes, where it remains for many years. It becomes a risk when it enters the food chain through human consumption of some saltwater and freshwater fish.

As I work with bills in the legislature, I am becoming more familiar with the mercury dilemma. It is an important component in fluorescent lights and a critical ingredient in dental amalgam fillings. It takes our temperatures with fever thermometers and controls the temperature of our homes with the thermostats. Some button batteries contain mercury, though household batteries have been mercury-free since 1990. It is even an ingredient in some cleaning products, though the mercury-containing disinfectant Mercurochrome has faded from use.

If you would like to participate in the thermometer exchange, please seal your thermometer in a ziplock bag and take it to the recycling center the morning of June 19th. If you can't make it next Saturday, call me at 567-1661 to work out a more convenient time for the exchange. If you have any other mercury device such as a thermostat, we can handle its disposal as well. Just be sure to have any such item in a sealed container.

We have 300 thermometers to offer. The event will be a great success if we can take that many old implements out of circulation in our town. Please help if you can.