



THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

# AAP News

**Breaking News**

January 22, 2013

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## Global ban on mercury grants exception to thimerosal-containing vaccines

by **Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff** • *Associate Editor*

A newly signed international treaty banning mercury has granted an exception to the mercury-based preservative thimerosal, widely used in resource-poor countries that depend on delivery of vaccines in multi-dose vials.

After years of negotiations among delegates from 147 member states, a treaty was finalized Jan. 19 as part of the Minamata Convention on Mercury. The process was hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Scheduled to be signed in October, the new treaty addresses the use of mercury in products and industrial processes, as well as other measures, to help prevent emissions and releases.

During the mercury discussions, numerous medical organizations noted that thimerosal should be exempt from the treaty to avoid disrupting global immunization efforts. Last year, the Academy and others endorsed such a recommendation by the World Health Organization's (WHO's) Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE) on Immunization. SAGE reaffirmed that thimerosal-containing vaccines were "safe, essential and irreplaceable components of immunization" programs.

Over the years, some anti-vaccine activists have confused ethylmercury with the highly dangerous neurotoxin methylmercury and erroneously linked thimerosal to autism.

The treaty exemption was viewed as a positive step by many vaccine experts.

"This is a bold stroke for protecting children," said Walt Orenstein, M.D., FAAP, of the Emory Vaccine Center. He credited the scientific community for providing the background information and showing how removing thimerosal from vaccines, thus requiring single-dose packaging, "could potentially be very harmful."

"We in the United States take for granted the refrigerator space and freezer space that we have, and so single-dose packaging, for example, has not been a big issue ... But when you look at the poor countries of the world who are very strapped, having to go from a 10-dose vial to 10 one-dose vials is a big, big stress on their refrigeration capacity. And so, it is absolutely key in allowing them to deliver these vaccines safely to children," Dr. Orenstein said.

"This will help in continuing to save lives in the developing world."

For details on the treaty, go to <http://www.unep.org/newscentre/default.aspx?DocumentID=2702&ArticleID=9373>.

Read a recent *AAP News* article on the issue at <http://aapnews.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/12/17/aapnews.20121217-1>.