

Global Consensus on Mercury: Scientists Defend Science Journalists

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There is no longer a need to debate whether the writings of journalists such as Ms. Sharon Begley (Newsweek) and Ms. Marian Burros (New York Times) are credible or biased, because there is a global consensus among scientists addressing the toxicity of mercury, its sources and the implications of both on public health. This consensus has been documented and is available to the public. As it turns out, their writings are consistent with that consensus.

Many of us joined over 1,000 of the world's foremost mercury experts for the International Conference on Mercury as a Global Pollutant. Together we developed a consensus declaration that addresses some of the specific points that have been raised here and elsewhere in the discussion around the New York Times article and the Oceana/Mercury Policy Project study. Many of us also have published peer reviewed scientific papers on the subject.

While the consensus declaration was not cause for tremendous alarm, it clearly highlighted the need to recognize that mercury levels in fish are cause for concern and that sensitive populations should choose low mercury fish in order to get the benefits of seafood while avoiding the risks of mercury. The consensus included the following points summarized below:

- About two thirds of the mercury in our environment is derived from human activities
- Mercury is highly toxic, biomagnifies in the aquatic food web and places humans at risk if they consume high levels of fish that are high on the food chain.
- In many populations there is evidence that current levels of exposure are sufficient to affect several physiological systems and as a result current mercury exposure levels constitute an important public health problem.
- Methylmercury affects nervous system development and there is sufficient evidence to warrant the prudent selection of fish in the diet, specifically for pregnant women and children.
- Long-lasting effects of fetal methylmercury exposure have been documented in children throughout the world.

Rather than following the selective science approach, and chasing down one or two studies that support a particular viewpoint, we recommend anyone who is truly interested should benefit from the full weight of the evidence by reading the scientific consensus in the Conference Declaration which is available here:

http://www.mercury2006.org/portals/31/Mercury2006_conferencedeclaration.pdf

Sincerely,

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More information:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/23/dining/23sushi.html>

<http://www.oceana.org/international-home-nao/>

<http://www.blog.newsweek.com/blogs/labnotes/archive/2008/01/24/would-you-like-mercury-with-your-sushi.aspx>