

## THE 2013 MINAMATA CONVENTION ON MERCURY

A treaty determining the future of dental amalgam was agreed by the United Nations Environmental Programme's Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee in Geneva on 20 January 2013. The global, legally-binding **treaty** aims to reduce environmental pollution from mercury, to which amalgam makes a contribution.

The British Dental Association welcomed the final version of the treaty, which achieves a reasonable balance between environmental considerations and the public health benefits of dental amalgam. Nations will be allowed to phase down amalgam use over an appropriate time period, an approach advocated by the World Health Organisation (WHO). It had been feared that a rapid ban on dental amalgam would be ordered, with a phase-out date possibly set within five years and with no provision for essential improvements in caries (dental decay) prevention and insufficient time allowed for the development of effective and safe alternative restorative materials.

In summary, the treaty sets out the future of dental amalgam as follows:

- Progress must be made in reducing the use of mercury in dentistry; this should be kept under frequent review. The WHO's phase-down approach has been acknowledged, by implication, as being appropriate.
- National governments may pace the phase-down according to domestic needs.
- Public health and prevention programmes designed to reduce the incidence of dental disease should be a focus.
- The use of appropriate non-mercury based materials should be encouraged.
- Research into improved non-mercury based alternative restorative materials should be encouraged.
- Best practice measures should be employed in reducing the environmental load arising from waste dental amalgam products.
- An earlier reference to non-evidence based "high risk" groups (children and pregnant women) has been removed.

In practice, the pace of amalgam phase-down in the UK will be determined at European level. The BDA and the Council of European Dentists (CED) will give advice to ensure that an achievable and evidence-based legislative framework is developed.

### International context

The EU's independent Scientific Committees on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) and on Health and Environmental Risks (SCHER) are in the process of updating their 2008 opinions on the **environmental impact** and **safety** of both dental amalgam and alternative restorative materials.

The 2008 reports concluded that dental health can be adequately ensured by both types of material and that they are safe to use. Since dental amalgam is the second greatest use of mercury in the EU (although its contribution to mercury pollution on a global scale is much smaller), it has been subject to particular scrutiny.

The CED (Council of European Dentists), has taken the position that the phasing out of amalgam will be appropriate only when viable replacement restorative materials are available. It believes that due to its ease of use, durability and cost-effectiveness, dental amalgam continues to be the most appropriate filling material for many restorations, and that restrictions on the use of amalgam would damage the financial stability of health systems as well as impact on individual patients' ability to afford dental care. It has called on European Governments to encourage the effective prevention of caries through health promotion programmes - which would result in the reduction in the use of all current restorative materials, including amalgam.