

UNEP mercury treaty *protects* access to thiomersal-containing vaccines

United Nations Environment Program has developed a treaty on mercury in an effort to protect human health and the environment by limiting mercury releases.

In the course of the negotiations, a proposal was made to restrict vaccines that contain the preservative thiomersal under a section of the treaty that prohibits trade of mercury-added products.

The implications of restricting thiomersal, an ethyl mercury-containing preservative, would be significant. According to SAGE, “Thiomersal-containing vaccines [are] safe, essential, and irreplaceable components of immunization programs, especially in developing countries, and...removal of these products would disproportionately jeopardize the health and lives of the most disadvantaged children worldwide.”

The treaty annex that describes prohibited products specifically excludes “vaccines containing thiomersal as preservatives” under a short list of products the authors intended to emphasize were to be protected.

Protecting access to vaccines came as the result of a strong partnership between WHO, UNICEF, GAVI, and civil society advocates and experts around the world to educate country delegates, who predominantly came from ministries of environment.

This was also a wonderful partnership with animal health experts, who similarly rely on thiomersal for veterinary vaccines.

By facilitating communication between ministries of health and ministries of environment, strong statements are made by delegates about the essential role of thiomersal-containing vaccines in protecting human health.

PATH will be collecting and disseminating additional information about how the community came together around this issue and lessons learned in the coming months.