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## Massachusetts Rids Mercury from State Hospitals

Until recently, thermometers, blood pressure cuffs, and other medical equipment containing mercury (a highly toxic persistent, bioaccumulative toxin, or PBT) were still being sold to some Massachusetts state hospitals and clinics. But that changed when the state went out to [bid](#) for medical equipment in 2001 and told vendors to stop offering products made with mercury.

When a broken mercury thermometer or other hospital device leaks even small quantities of mercury, the costs of cleanup are high. And if the spill is not managed properly, toxic vapors can be inhaled by patients and staff. When a mercury thermometer breaks in the sink, the mercury that runs down the drain can wind up in lakes and other water bodies, where it can build up in fish eventually consumed by humans. Finally, when mercury thermometers and other mercury-containing devices are thrown out in the trash, releases of mercury from landfills and incinerators can pollute our lakes and rivers.

Given these health and environmental concerns, and Massachusetts' commitment to implementing a "[zero mercury strategy](#)," the state's hospital and laboratory purchasing team decided to minimize mercury equipment available on state contracts. Working with INFORM and the state's mercury reduction coordinator, the team developed bid specifications for the medical and surgical supply contract, asking that vendors sell only mercury-free products except where no alternatives are available, and requesting that they offer mercury reduction services such as product disposal assistance. The [contract](#) was awarded in March 2001.

Massachusetts has now eliminated virtually all mercury-containing devices from its primary medical supply contract. Despite the exception allowed in the contract, so far no vendor has identified a product for which a mercury-free substitute does not exist. To test vendor compliance with the new rules, INFORM and the state's mercury reduction coordinator attempted to buy products that traditionally contain mercury. The response was positive, with one vendor saying when asked about a mercury-containing product, "We're not supposed to sell that."

A number of vendors have also opted to provide various mercury reduction services. For example, one will help identify mercury products already present in the hospital, coordinate their safe disposal, and provide educational materials on mercury products. Another vendor will provide mercury-free electronic thermometers at no charge in exchange for supplying the hospital's probe covers.

INFORM estimates that changes in Massachusetts' medical and surgical supply contract have reduced the purchase of mercury by state medical facilities by at least five pounds, enough to contaminate over three million stripped bass, or 3000 lakes.

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