European Commission reviews environmental aspects of mercury in dental fillings

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HONG KONG: The European Commission has decided to examine the risks of using mercury in amalgam fillings. As some member states have already restricted the use of dental amalgam substantially, the Commission wants to assess this issue in detail with due consideration of all relevant aspects of its life cycle. The study is to be concluded in June 2012.

The focus of the study is on the environmental rather than on the health aspects of dental amalgam. While scientific debate on the potential health effects of the use of dental amalgam is still controversial, the need for proper management of dental amalgam waste is not disputed. It is expected that a significant quantity of mercury originating from dental fillings, estimated at over 1,000 tonnes for the entire EU population, will probably ultimately end up in the environment, e.g. by release into the soil via burial, or even by direct emission into the atmosphere following cremation, unless relevant policy measures are considered.

Dental Tribune Asia Pacific has learned that the Commission recently awarded a contract to a consultant to investigate the current situation in relation to the quantity of mercury used in dental amalgam in the EU and identify measures that could reduce its environmental impact.

The study’s findings will be presented and discussed during a workshop in Brussels in March 2012 and potential stakeholders will have the opportunity to give feedback. According to the European Commission, interested parties are welcome to provide input during the process and express their interest in participating in the workshop.

The Commission will take the results of the study into account, as well as relevant international developments, before proceeding with potential policy measures.

Under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme, discussions on the reduction of mercury use are also taking place internationally. Negotiations, in which the European Commission represents the EU, started in 2010 and shall be completed by 2015. Dental amalgam is amongst the products currently discussed as potential candidates for being regulated.