ADA's best management practices call on all dentists to use chair-side traps and (where compatible with the suction system used in the office) vacuum pump filters, and these standard control methods remove approximately 77 percent of the scrap amalgam from dental office wastewater. The waste amalgam captured by these devices can be recycled, rather than going down the drain.

“In addition to promoting scientific research into amalgam-related environmental questions, the ADA has also worked voluntarily with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help make greater amalgam recycling a reality. Together, we developed a national consensus standard to make amalgam recycling better and more universal. That standard is known as American National Standards Institute/American Dental Association Specification 109 ‘Procedures for Storing Dental Amalgam Waste and Requirements for Amalgam Waste Storage/Transportation Containers.’ In developing this standard, we reached out to EPA, recyclers and other parties of interest. We now provide dentists with lists of available recyclers, and we advocate compliance by these recyclers with this new consensus standard.

“None of this would have been possible had ADA not also vigorously promoted its best management practices to dentists throughout the nation. We have distributed posters and brochures explaining the BMPs to every dentist in the nation (not just ADA members). We partnered with the Naval Institute for Dental and Biomedical research to produce an instructional DVD on the Association’s BMPs. Through an EPA grant, we distributed that DVD and related educational materials to every dentist in the Great Lakes region. The ADA promotes BMPs on its web site (www.ada.org) and offers, in partnership with state dental societies, training programs for dentists. And, as noted above, the ADA sponsored the most thorough, peer-reviewed study of the issue of dental office wastewater. This bears repeating here—all of the ADA’s policies and recommendations regarding dental care and dental practice are based on the best available science.

“But the ADA has not stopped with these efforts. This year, the association amended its list of recommended best management practices to include the use of amalgam separators. This action was taken because dentistry has now had greater experience with dependable amalgam separators. The ADA recognizes that amalgam separators offer an actual environmental benefit. They capture waste amalgam, making it available for recycling. Based on available data, we also expect that they reduce the mercury levels in treatment plant biosolids. We are now awaiting the results of a new study by the National Association of Clean Water Agencies on the same topic. While there were some serious limitations to that study’s design, we are confident it will add to our knowledge in this area.

“But we should be clear in our expectations. Based on that same data, separators do not seem to reduce mercury levels in surface waters. The reason for this is that both separators and wastewater treatment plants remove approximately the same portion of waste amalgam. In other words, the amalgam is either captured in a separator or at the treatment plant. Accordingly, the two chief advantages of separators are (1) they permit the captured amalgam waste to be available for recycling; and (2) they likely prevent a significant amount of waste amalgam from being deposited in wastewater treatment plant biosolids. The ADA is just beginning to promote its revised best management practices and will continue to do so. We expect to engage in additional outreach and educational efforts with our members.

“Moreover, as we did in the past, we are eager to pursue additional creative partnerships with both private sector and governmental agencies to develop new ways of reaching the dental community. We are proud of the progress our BMPs have made, but we are committed to continuous improvements in this area.

“Dentistry’s record of voluntarily meeting the highest standards of health and safety make it clear: The government does not need to mandate amalgam separators, other specific technologies or practices related to the profession’s environmental impact.

“For further example, the U.S. EPA just recently recognized in a Federal Register notice, ‘It appears that the dental industry is already actively working towards voluntarily reducing its mercury discharges.’”