Resolution 1816 (2011)[1]

Health hazards of heavy metals and other metals

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is concerned that, in their health policies, the member states of the Council of Europe pay insufficient attention to the health hazards of metals, for which there is sound scientific evidence in many cases. There is increasing evidence that the permanent exposure of human beings to small doses of substances such as aluminium, cadmium, mercury or lead could be one of the co-determinants of certain neurological, cardiovascular or autoimmune illnesses.

2. Given the right of every individual to a healthy environment, preventive health strategies to reduce human exposure to such harmful substances should be a political priority. This is made all the more urgent by the high actual cost of heavy metals, which are strongly suspected of contributing to chronic medical conditions that in turn place a heavy burden on national health insurance funds.

3. In addition to the immediate political and legislative action that is needed, in accordance with the precautionary principle, scientific research on all the complex features of heavy metals should continue. This will help to establish a causal link between the presence of heavy metals in the human environment and some human illnesses, identify more appropriate responses to these illnesses and adopt industrial processes and treatment methods in line with the best current scientific knowledge.

4. To strengthen national policies, the right of every human being to a healthy environment should be more securely anchored and reinforced in international standards, including those of the Council of Europe. The Assembly has already made repeated appeals in this respect, for example by adopting Recommendation 1885 (2009) on drafting an additional protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights concerning the right to a healthy environment, but to date the Committee of Ministers has done nothing tangible to follow up on this.

5. All action relating to heavy metals can be placed in an international context in which the threats that these substances pose to human health and the environment are increasingly recognised. For instance, the European Union is currently reviewing its Community strategy on mercury until the end of 2011, and negotiations are under way as part of the United Nations Environment Programme to draw up a binding international instrument on mercury by 2013. The Council of Europe member states should take an active part in these negotiations and act as pioneers in the movement towards innovative health and environment policies.

6. The Assembly notes that the scientific and medical knowledge regarding heavy metals has reached such a level that there is no longer any reason to defer practical action to reduce their presence or eliminate them from the human environment and hence to alleviate their impact on people's health. It therefore calls on all the member states to support an innovative political approach to the issue and take the following comprehensive measures:

6.1. identify heavy metals and their health hazards as health and environment policy priorities, while adopting the precautionary principle endorsed in Recommendation 1787 (2007) on the precautionary principle and responsible risk management. In so doing, states should focus on eliminating as many

1. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 27 May 2011 (see Doc. 12613, report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Huss).

heavy metals as possible from the human environment, preventing the bioaccumulation of such substances in the natural environment, the food chain and, finally, the human body, preventing and treating chronic conditions caused by them and providing special protection for the most vulnerable;

6.2. in the European Union and in other international settings, promote the establishment of stricter rules on the production, use and import of products containing heavy metals, including specific limits concerning exposure to heavy metals, in particular for the most vulnerable people, to be established in collaboration with the World Health Organization;

6.3. organise and facilitate exchanges of knowledge and good practice between specialised national authorities so that they can acquire more information on the subject and take inspiration from successful policy measures adopted elsewhere.

7. The Assembly urges all member states to take the following preventive measures in respect of the most toxic heavy metals, such as mercury:

7.1. prohibit or limit, wherever possible and appropriate, the use of heavy metals by industry, agriculture and by the medical sector, and where the latter is concerned, particularly by restricting or prohibiting the use of amalgam for dental fillings;

7.2. promote the broad dissemination of information on the health effects of heavy metals to allow all professionals and consumers to make informed choices with regard to matters such as medical treatment methods, consumer products, food and means of transport, without having to wait for more radical political measures;

7.3. promote scientific and technological research on means of replacing heavy metals in all industrial and agricultural processes and medical treatment in the long term, while setting up strongly regulated systems to prevent conflicts of interest for the experts involved, such as those referred to in Assembly Recommendation 1908 (2010) on lobbying in a democratic society (European code of good conduct on lobbying), by notably supporting medical research in this field;

7.4. where heavy metals cannot be replaced immediately, reduce their entry into, and bioaccumulation in, the natural and human environment as much as possible, among other measures by requiring all users and emitters of heavy metals, including dentists, to install efficient anti-pollution and filtering equipment.

8. At international and European standard-setting levels, promotion of the right to health and the right to a healthy environment as fundamental human rights must continue. In this respect, the Assembly calls on the member states to continue to promote the idea in the Council of Europe of an additional protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights concerning the right to a healthy environment as proposed by its Recommendation 1885 (2009). Furthermore, it considers that 2011 – the year of the 50th anniversary and 15th anniversary respectively of the European Social Charter and the revised European Social Charter – would be an ideal time to introduce the right to a healthy environment into the revised European Social Charter, for example under Article 11 on the right to protection of health.