

Health Impact of Mercury Containing Skin Whitening Products and Minamata Convention



**Round Table
(Hybrid)**

September 19, 2023

Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad

Date	September 19. 2023
Venue	Conference Room, SDPI
Organizer	Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad
Agenda	Attached as annexure I
Participants	National Focal Point on Chemicals & Minamata convention M/o Climate Change, Dermatologists from public and private sector, virtual participation from Pakistan Association of Aesthetics and Dermatology. List of participants attached as annexure II
Methodology	Presentation and panel discussion

Background

The obsession with fair skin especially in subcontinent is linked with the class and social acceptability especially for girls is prevalent in Southeast Asia (subcontinent). Living under colonial regimes for more than two centuries could have influenced the local population to perceive white skin as sign of power and superiority. Presently desire to be lighter skin is intensified by large growing skin whitening creams and extensive electronic and print media campaigns. Unfortunately, success in professional and personal life is associated with fair skin in campaigns influencing the young generation. Despite the fact that mercury and mercury salts (mercurous chloride and oxides) because of their toxicity and harmful human effects are prohibited to use in Skin Lightening Products, their production and continued use is now a serious public and global health concern. According to FDA and other regulatory authorities including Pakistan mercury content of Skin Whitening Creams should be less than 1ppm as standard. According to WHO report (2013) many SWC manufactured in Pakistan are containing higher mercury content than recommended. Pakistan is signatory of Minamata convention with the commitment of phasing out and banning all cosmetic including SWC containing more than 1ppm mercury. Study by SDPI in 2016 on mercury content of SWC is the evidence that most of the population using SWC contain dangerous levels of mercury with harmful health effects. However presently these products are openly available in the market and does not undergo prior Standard checking of mercury content although standards are in place, exposing general public to its hazardous effects. The continued presence of high levels of mercury in local brands of skin whiteners in Pakistan is an indication of a significant risk from their use among the local population. Therefore, it became necessary to seek opinion of dermatologists and skin specialists on

the use and also assess the prevalence of health complications of SWCs use among their growing number of patients.

Broader themes under discussion are:

- Scale of problem
- Major complaints/conditions seen in practice.
- General public awareness of hazardous effects of mercury containing SWCs.
- Role of legislation, awareness raising campaigns, display of content on container as preventive measures Banning skin whitening products and saving young girls/boys from permanent damage.
- Role of Pakistan Association of Dermatologists in policy making and implementing standards (mercury

Objective

The objective of the round table was to seek opinions of dermatologists and skin specialists/ general physicians on the use of mercury containing skin whitening products and also to assess the prevalence of health complications of SWCs usage among their growing number of patients.

Inaugural session

Dr Razia Safdar inaugurated and moderated the session by giving brief introduction to the problems rising with the usage of mercury containing skin whitening product. And requested the participants to bring out some concrete recommendations so that they can be forwarded to Ministry of climate change to consider for the policy actions

Proceedings of the discussion

Presentation by Dr Razia Safdar (Advisor Health, SDPI)

Dr Razia Safdar gave the presented overview of health impact of using mercury containing SWCs, a public health problem and Pakistan's obligation towards Minamata Convention. The mercury third most hazardous chemical impacting human health and environment. This heavy metal is found naturally and Produced by anthropogenic activity as industrial waste and contaminate environment and water. It is used in many every day used products and medical equipment and medicinal (Dental amalgam) and vaccines as vehicle. There are many skin condition caused by use of mercury containing SWCs to mention a few rosacea, melanosis, eczema rash, skin thinning, skin sensitivity, hyperpigmentation, melasma and many other long-term issues According to Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) Data, 164 mercury containing skin whitening products of Pakistani origin were identified.

According to SDPI study (2016), 59 SWCs of local and international brands were tested for mercury content and only three of them had mercury content below 1ppm. She mentioned the importance of Minamata Convention and compliance of this convention is important to save our nation from the harmful impact of mercury.



Professor Dr Nadia Afraz

There is new trend of prescribing skin whitening /lightening creams by qualified doctors with out knowing the content of mercury and steroids in these agents. These whitening creams have gain so much trust of public that when doctors prescribed the medicine which is suitable for the skin problem people don't use that but uses the counter product to get immediate results without knowing the damaging and injurious effect in the long run. This should be taken as public safety issue everyone should play their role by condemn the usage of these SWCs. She highlighted the vulnerable groups like women of child bearing age , pregnant ,adolescent girls and boys who can be effected badly. She is strong advocate of awareness campaigns, use of social media platforms, video messages for general population along with seminars, group discussions by experts and reaching out to policy makers and implementers with strong evidence. As representative of PAD ,raising the Issue at conferences can be effective for awareness and PAD as private platform does not have authority to influence the member dermatologists. Dermatologists have to work in environment of strong opposition by industry of such awareness conference and seminars , initiatives. Banning of advertisements will have small impact on community as compared to counselling about harmful effects of products will have high impact.

Dr. Nuzhat Tirmizi Dermatologist Private Practitioner(Lahore, virtual)

Dr Nuzhat added to the discussion that she has observed that fair skin color is a sign of beauty and due to this societal pressure, people are forced to use such products. She mentioned role of corner beauty parlors and saloon as producers of concoction of creams for their clients and combining different creams and multiple chemicals including higher mercury content. Clients are using it for beauty and fairness and are happy in the beginning but in long run this would result in harmful skin impacts, which bring them to dermatologists. To avoid such practices, she suggested that we should adopt holistic approach by creating awareness and education of the masses. Social media should play their role in highlighting the harmful effect of using these creams and other mercury containing products and adopting the slogan of beauty lies in healthy skin not in fair skin. There should be regulation that doctors cannot prescribe steroids, and other such medicine which can cause skin damage in long run

Dr. Riffat (General Practitioner)

Dr. Riffat shared her experience of working in rural areas, she said there are a lot of skin problems in the rural areas because of two major reasons; (i) direct exposure to sun/ heat, (ii) use of whitening creams excessively. The people using whitening creams have zero knowledge about the damaging effect of using these creams. She suggested that awareness about the harm and damage due to such creams should be created through media and government should make some legislations to avoid and ban the use of mercury in cosmetic industry. From her personal experience she found health providers as agent of change and counselling is very effective way of reducing the use of such products from demand side.

Dr Attiya Tareen Associate Professor

Fauji Foundation Medical College

Dr Attiya added to the discussion that along with mercury and lead there are a lot of steroids present in the whitening creams which damage the skin. She highlighted the Importance of standards and implementation and monitoring of standards. she mentioned the importance of good labs to check the mercury content and unfortunately, we do not have capacity / labs with quality, to check mercury, lead content widely.

Dr Mehwish Aftab (Assistant Professor, PIMS)

She is working at tertiary care hospital in Islamabad which caters complicated patients from up north KP and Afghanistan where population have very fair skin, so these SWCs are not used only for whitening rather as a beauty product, as anti-aging, acne prevention, which she considers a wrong practice. She mentioned that many patients know the side effects of such products but due to habituation/addiction of such products users are reluctant to discontinue the use despite aware. There is a need to change the viewpoint of the society that healthy skin is important rather than fair skin, while healthy skin comes from healthy lifestyle. Dermatology is not given much importance at under graduate level curriculum and exams so general practitioners should have knowledge while prescribing products containing harmful chemicals.

Dr Shafia Muddasir (Dermatologist/ Private practitioner)

She said there are a lot of patients who want to have fair skin and beauty in the name of whitening creams. For this she was with the view point that the biggest culprits are the beauty saloons and spas. They are offering the clients the formula creams and misguide about the dermatologists and medications. Further she added that hydroquinone are banned since long and it is not supposed to be added in the medication but still it is present in these SWCs along with mercury and other steroids irrespective of the hazardous impact on human health. She mentioned that public awareness is very necessary in form of brochures, advertisements etc. pharmaceutical companies should also play their role by employing qualified doctors who have knowledge about such matters. The accountability of pharma companies is also important because many companies are making such products illegally.



Dr Maria (Registrar, PIMS) Counselling the patients about the harmful health impacts of SWCs is important but at the same time doctors should prescribe the good alternative to the patients which are free of side effects to the patients. She is the opinion of counter advertisements by showing injurious effects, pictorial warning on cigarette packs.

Dr Zaigham Abbas (Focal Point Minamata Convention, M/o Climate Change)

Dr. Zaigham Abbas thanked and appreciated the organizers and SDPI team for highlighting this important topic. He said ministry of climate change is the main custodian of international negotiations, conventions and protocols. Pakistan became the part of Minamata Convention in 2013. Describing the current situation, 3 key areas are prioritized ; (i) coal mining industry, where the use of mercury is very high in making different products like caustic soda and other things. This is taken as priority because many workers in the industry are in direct contact with mercury and inhaling mercury vapors. This is leading to adverse effect on their health as well as on environment. Few industries which are using mercury in their products are completely sealed. He stated that no industry in Pakistan is using mercury but they are shifted to Anion Exchange Membrane (AEM) technology. (ii)The second priority is the use of mercury in lightings (compact fluorescent lamps) while many companies have now stopped making these lamps. (iii) health sector is also one of the prioritized areas where we have mercury in BP apparatus, thermometer, dental filling and SWCs. After the ratification of Minamata convention in 2020, the M/o CC started mass awareness campaigns about the mercury based SWCs and it was observed the alarming situation, that 59 products were detected as mercury based out of which only 3 products are up to the given standard that is mercury content should be less than 1ppm.



There is no existing legislation for restricting mercury content in SWCs.

Since 2016, the import of mercury and mercury compounds are restricted and can only be used for industrial purpose. But still the ban or restriction is not fully implemented or followed, so that mercury is still in used in making SWCs. He said strict restriction is needed on import of mercury compounds except for industrial purpose. Further he added that, the Minamata Convention is very supportive for SWCs by clearly defining the standard of mercury (less than 1 ppm). According to the convention there will be restriction on imports and exports of SWCs having mercury content by 2025. In case of exceeding the limit of 1ppm it will be seized.

National Hazardous Waste Management Policy is approved by federal government, action plan for this has been developed and mercury is a part of it. National Chemical Control Act will be developed, which will help in controlling the minute amount of chemical which have been used cosmetics products.

Key take aways

It has been concluded from the discussion that:

- Strict legislation and regulations are required to limit the amount of mercury and other chemical used in the cosmetics and other industries which are creating damage to the skin.
- By 2025 Import and Export of SWCs having more than 1ppm will be restricted .
- Health providers are agent of change and can reduce demand through provision of alternative safe products and effective counselling.

- Improve capacity of monitoring tools /quality of Labs to detect mercury in SWC
- Regulation of beauty saloons
- Addressing platform sale (online)
- Initiating discussions among experts at conferences, seminars at higher forums like Pakistan Association of Dermatologists (PAD)
- Awareness of general public by utilizing all forms of media including social media extensively
- Change of concept of beauty from fair skin to healthy skin
- Building counter narrative towards advertisements.

The discussion was closed with the vote of thanks.

Annexure I

Attendance Sheet

Annexure II

RTD Agenda

Prevalence of Health Impacts of Mercury Containing Skin Whitening Creams and Minamata Convention

19th September, (Tuesday) 2023

S. No.	Time	Agenda	Facilitator
1.	10:35- 10:45	Introduction/ setting the stage	Dr. Razia Safdar
2.	10:45-11:30	Discussion around the following thematic areas: • Scale of the problem • Major complaints/ conditions seen in practice • General public awareness of hazardous effects of mercury containing SWCs • Role of legislation awareness raising campaigns, display of content on container as preventive measures • Banning of skin whitening products and saving young girls/boys from permanent damage. • Role of Pakistan Association of Dermatologists in policy making and implementing standards (mercury <1ppm) and advocacy in Pakistan and commitment towards Minamata Convention.	Dermatologists/ Experts • Dr. Nigar (Dermatologist, Poly Clinic) • Dr. Irum (Dermatologist, PIMS) • Dr. Nadia Ali Azfar (Dermatologist) • Dr. Shafia Mudassir (Dermatologist & Aesthetic Specialist) • Dr. Riffat Anwar • Dr. Ambreen • Dr. Nuzhat Tirmizi • Dr. Attiya Tareen • Dr. Abida (Royal Cosmetics, Islamabad)
3.	11:30- 11:45	Comments by M/o NHSRC	Dr. Ambreen Director Institutions M/o NHSRC
4.	11:45-12:00	Concluding Remarks	Dr. Zaigham Abbas Focal point Minamata Convention M/o Climate Change

