A mercury spill inside a major government hospital in Manila prompted officials on Saturday to order a cleanup that required the transfer of least 40 patients from the pediatric ward—and raised questions on why it was still keeping a stock of a chemical supposed to be banned from public health facilities since 2008.

Assistant Secretary Eric Tayag of the Department of Health (DOH) said a cleanup was underway at Dr. Jose Fabella Memorial Hospital in Sta. Cruz, after an initial assessment showed unacceptable mercury levels in several areas in and around the storage room.

“Forty patients from the pediatric ward adjacent to the area of the spill were already transferred to another ward in the hospital as a precautionary measure” after mercury spilled from a broken container in the storage room on Aug. 8, Tayag said in a DOH statement.

In a phone interview, Tayag said the mercury was already up for disposal but that the process would require supervision from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

“We are still looking for answers,” Tayag said. “What we know was that the dental amalgam spill was discovered in a building away from patient areas, where it was temporarily stored after the DOH-issued ban in 2008.”

The spilled mercury had apparently evaporated and could affect the brain and the central nervous system if inhaled, he said. “High exposures can cause respiratory difficulty and even death.”

Individuals believed to have been exposed were also being examined, the DOH said.

**Toxic effects**
Mercury is considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) as one of the Top 10 chemicals of major health concern. Small amounts of exposure can already cause serious health problems, including for a child in the womb.

Its toxic effects include damage to the brain, kidney and lungs, skin and eyes. Other symptoms of mercury poisoning include headaches, insomnia, memory loss, muscle weakness and impairment of speech, hearing and walking. At higher doses, it could cause kidney and respiratory failure.

Tayag said Fabella would continue to accept and care for patients “as the current assessments do not require any evacuation.”

Established in Sta. Cruz in the 1950s, the government hospital has earned a reputation as a “baby factory” for the sheer number of births recorded there, at 60 to 80 daily, reportedly the highest in any hospital in the country.

Tayag said a DOH response team was working with the Hazardous Material Unit of the Bureau of Fire Protection to determine the extent of the chemical spill and initiate remediation procedures.

“(Health) Secretary (Enrique) Ona laments that this incident happened and ordered a review of the proper and safe storage and disposal of harmful chemicals, particularly mercury, in all hospitals to prevent a similar incident from happening again,” Tayag said.

According to the DOH, Fabella was one of the health facilities that had discontinued the use of mercury-containing medical devices after the DOH ordered their phaseout in 2008.

“All health facilities were ordered to comply with the mercury ban by 2010,” Tayag said. With a report from Inquirer Research
Mercury Amalgam Spill in Hospital Causes Evacuation

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