

No-mercury future for thermometers

About 7 million mercury thermometers in hospitals and clinics across China may be phased out by the end of this year, as an international treaty to protect human health and the environment from poisonous mercury took effect in China on Wednesday.

They will be replaced by mercury-free products, including electronic thermometers, which have been widely adopted in hospitals across China, according to the China Medical Devices Industry Association.

Yang Xiaofang, from the association's legal department, said at a news conference on Wednesday that China will follow the World Health Organization's proposal to reduce global demand for mercury thermometers and blood pressure gauges 70 percent by the end of this year.

There are currently more than 11 million mercury thermometers in use at medical institutions in China, according to the National Institute of Hospital Administration.

China will immediately ban the opening of new primary mercury mines, and will ban further mining at all existing primary mercury mines starting in 2032, according to a public notice released on Tuesday by 17 central government ministries and bureaus, including the Ministry of Environmental Protection.

China will also gradually ban the production, import and export of certain types of electrical switches, cosmetics and pesticides that contain mercury.

Production of thermometers and blood pressure gauges that contain mercury will be banned in China in 2026, the notice said.

The sales value of mercury thermometers accounts for more than 70 percent of the total value of thermometer sales in China, but many producers had already started the switch to mercury-free thermometers before China ratified the convention, Yang said.

Authorities should encourage the development of cheaper and more reliable alternatives to mercury thermometers and roll out policies for handling thermometers that are phased out or damaged, the National Institute of Hospital Administration said.

Medical equipment containing mercury, such as mercury thermometers, has already been banned in some European countries, such as Sweden. Mercury can vaporize at normal temperatures, causing serious damage to the human nervous system.