



As a humanitarian, Dr Lillian Lasaten-Ebuen has created the Bantay Ngipin [tooth guardian] project, through which she and her team provide mercury-free dental services to children aged 6–12 and pregnant women. She focuses on children because they are the most susceptible to dental caries. (Photograph: Dr Lillian Lasaten-Ebuen)

Mercury-free Philippines—One dentist is making a difference



By Anita Vazquez Tibau
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QUEZON CITY, Philippines: The Philippines Chapter of the International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology was founded by Dr Lillian Lasaten-Ebuen in 2009. Since then, Lasaten-Ebuen has been working to promote mercury-free and mercury-safe dentistry throughout the Philippines and was an active participant in the negotiations for the Minamata Convention on Mercury, a United Nations treaty signed in 2013. This participation allowed her the

platform to implement various programmes and partnerships, both governmental and non-governmental, for raising awareness of this critical issue.

In 2012, she launched the first national campaign for mercury-free dentistry in partnership with the Department of Health (DOH). This was the first time that training in mercury-free dentistry was given to government dentists, highlighting the need for mercury-safe removal, the provision of mercury-free alternatives, and the promotion of oral health and environmental protection.

The Philippines has 36 dental schools, the first school having opened in 1913. It takes six years to earn a Doctor of Dental Medicine. According to Lasaten-Ebuen, it is estimated that there are between 15,000 and 18,000 dentists in the country, which has a population of almost 105 million. Today, the Philippines DOH is working on an administrative order on a dental amalgam phase-out and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is revising the Chemical Control Order for Mercury and Mercury Compounds, in terms of which dental amalgam is to be phased out five years from the effective date of the order. Both government agencies, the DOH and the DENR, together with other stakeholders, including civil society groups, academia and concerned communities, have agreed to moving the Philippines towards a mercury-free environment.

In the Philippines, like many countries where mercury-dependent artisanal and small-scale gold-mining (ASGM) is active, eliminating mercury from the dental industry will stop miners obtaining the element through that illicit source. It is estimated that about 70 per cent of the gold production in the Philippines comes from ASGM and that approximately 300,000 people, including women and children, participate in this activity. According to the Mines and Geoscience Bureau of the DENR, the Philippines is one of the world's 20 largest gold producers. According to the Minamata Convention, ASGM is the largest contributor to mercury pollution of the environment and is a top priority of the treaty. There are initiatives that are being introduced to support mercury-free mining techniques in the Philippines, like the borax method.

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