

Minamata Convention Compliance in Pakistan: Role of Dermatologists and Regulatory Authorities

Roundtable

The panel is accepting abstracts

The use of mercury, the third most hazardous chemical, in cosmetics - particularly for its skin-whitening effects - has been documented across the globe since the 19th Century, including in developing countries. In South Asia, obsession with fair skin is deeply rooted in cultural and social norms, where lighter skin is often associated with higher social status and greater acceptability, especially for women. This preference for fair skin is likely influenced by the region's colonial history, where the ruling class's lighter skin was perceived as a symbol of power and superiority. Today, this desire for lighter skin is further fuelled by the booming market for skin-whitening products and the relentless promotion of these products through extensive electronic and print media campaigns. Unfortunately, many campaigns associate fair skin with success in both professional and personal life, significantly influencing the younger generation.

Even though mercury and mercury salts, such as mercurous chloride and oxides, are prohibited in skin lightening products due to their toxicity and harmful effects on human health, their production and continued use remain a serious public and global health concern. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other regulatory authorities, including those in Pakistan, mercury content of skin-whitening creams (SWCs) should be less than 1 part per million (ppm) as a standard. However, [a report by the World Health Organization \(WHO\) in 2013](#) revealed that many SWCs manufactured in Pakistan contain higher mercury content than recommended. [Pakistan is a signatory](#) to the [Minamata Convention](#), committing to phasing out and banning all cosmetics, including SWCs, containing more than 1 ppm of mercury. This commitment was reaffirmed at the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Minamata Convention on Mercury ([COP-5](#)) in 2023, where the agenda to phase out and ban mercury-containing SWCs was stressed. However, these products are still openly available in the market without undergoing prior checks for mercury content, despite existing standards and regulations, thereby exposing the general public to their hazardous effects.

As Pakistan has ratified the Minamata Convention and the Ministry of Climate Change & Environmental Coordination (MOCC&EC) is the custodian of this convention, certain interventions have been made, but these need to be further enhanced through expert input. To address this, it is essential to seek the opinions of dermatologists on the use of SWCs and to assess the prevalence of related health complications among their patients. In line with this objective, this roundtable discussion will focus on understanding the current situation and exploring strategies to phase out and ban mercury-containing SWCs in Pakistan, in support of the Minamata Convention's implementation and enforcement. Broader themes under discussion will include:

Extent and Severity of the Problem

- Prevalence of mercury use in skin-whitening products
- Common health complaints and conditions observed in clinical practice

Public Awareness and Education

- Current level of public knowledge about the hazardous effects of mercury in cosmetics
- Effective strategies for increasing awareness through campaigns and educational programmes

Legislative and Regulatory Measures

- Evaluation of existing laws and regulations regarding mercury use in cosmetics
- Enforcement of bans on mercury-containing SWCs
- Importance of accurate labeling and disclosure of product contents

Roles and Responsibilities of Key Stakeholders

- **Health Regulatory Authorities:** Implementing and monitoring compliance with safety standards
- **Dermatologists:** Advocating for safe practices and guiding patients towards healthier alternatives
- **Academic Institutions:** Conducting research to support policymaking and educating future professionals
- **Civil Society Organisations:** Supporting advocacy efforts and community engagement

Implementation of the Minamata Convention in Pakistan

- Progress and challenges in aligning national policies with the Convention's guidelines
- Collaborative efforts required to effectively phase out mercury use in cosmetics.

Panel Organisers

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