

Mad as a Hatter

by Dr. Jeffrey Supple, DMD

The expression Mad as a hatter is linked to the hat making industry and mercury poisoning during the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th century. Mercury nitrate was burnished into the fur of rabbits by hand to make the felt used for hats. Exposure to the mercury caused hatters to develop physical and mental ailments like tremors “hatters shakes”, speech problems, emotional instability and hallucinations.

Mercury-free dentistry and mercury safe dentistry are not the same thing. Back in the middle 1980's, I knew I wanted to become a dentist, so I sought out experience in the dental field and that's when I met Dr. Bill Wolfe. I assisted him with a patient one day and what an eye-opening day that was...I got an introduction to muscle testing (kinesiology) and the bio-compatibility of dental materials as well as a personal lesson to **never place mercury fillings**.

Off I went to dental school and graduated from Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, Boston Massachusetts in 1991. Then I returned to my native New Mexico and started my first dental practice just north of Santa Fe in Pojoaque. From day one, I made the decision to never place mercury fillings in my patient's teeth. That decision was based on my having known Dr. Bill Wolfe, and his passion for being a mercury safe dentist. I was actually called a Bondodontist by colleagues in the early 1990's (which was at the time a slang term for a dentist that only placed bonded fillings and not mercury). The issue back then was that bonded fillings weren't as strong as mercury fillings and wouldn't last as long. That was true so some dentists thought by placing them it was a disservice to the patient. Working with alternative dental materials instead of mercury amalgam was somehow letting your patient down; and even worse – snubbing the profession.

I left Santa Fe and returned to my home town of Albuquerque still feeling good about never taken up the bad habit of filling teeth full of mercury. I had a philosophy that when I saw a defective mercury filling (one that was broken or had recurrent decay) I would inform the patient that the better solution would be to remove the defective mercury filling and replace it with a bonded restoration resulting in one less mercury filling in their mouth. This way of thinking may well have defined me as a mercury-free dentist, but by no means was I practicing mercury safe dentistry. For the vast majority of my career. I would simply drill out the defective mercury filling – just as I was taught by one of the leading dental schools in the US – without any regards to where the mercury was going or who in the room was actually being exposed to the dangerous vapors, namely the patient my assistant or myself.

Fast forward to today, I was in the right place in my career and at the right time when I learned that Dr. Wolfe was looking for a successor to take over his practice as he was planning his retirement. I knew right then that his practice was exactly where I needed to be. and I made the commitment to carry on the legacy of his mercury safe way of practicing dentistry and use a Safe Mercury Amalgam Removal Technique. (SMART) as outlined by the International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology of which I am a member.