

Mercury scare closes LM classrooms

Teacher had elevated levels; facilities closed and cleaned as precaution

By JIM MCCAFFREY

Lower Merion School District administrators shut down science classrooms in both high schools this week after a chemistry teacher from Lower Merion High School reported elevated levels of mercury were found in his bloodstream.

The Harriton classrooms were tested, closed and cleaned as a precaution when traces of mercury were found.

A cleanup of four Harriton classrooms and three Lower Merion classrooms began last weekend. Health officials have told the school district the level of airborne contamination was "way below" levels the Pennsylvania Department of

Health considers dangerous. Lower Merion Director of Operations Patrick Guinnane confirmed the shutdown Tuesday evening.

"Last Wednesday, one of our chemistry teachers at Lower Merion called to tell us he had a physical and his doctor found elevated levels of mercury in his bloodstream," Guinnane explained. "He felt the contamination may be from his classroom."

The school district immediately closed the classrooms and called in its environmental engineering firm, Spotts, Stevens and McCoy of Reading. The firm took air and wipe samples, Guinnane said.

"There was evidence of residual mercury in the classrooms," he added. "We believe it was the result of things like thermometers broken over the years and the mercury not being completely cleaned up. We decided to keep the classrooms closed and do a cleanup."

Spotts, Stevens brought in

hand held air detection devices. It found areas of residual mercury on countertops, drawers and on the floors. The district contacted Clean Harbors Environmental Services of Deptford, N.J., to perform a cleanup.

The firm brought in a high-efficiency particulate air filter and wiped surfaces with cloths carrying Mercury X, which picks up residual mercury.

Guinnane believes the cleaning was successful.

"I'm waiting now for the results of the tests after the cleanup," he said. "I'm pretty sure they will be acceptable. I'm think they will be favorable, and we will be able to use the rooms again this week."

The operations director said the school district contacted township, county and state health officials.

"They all concluded based on the amount of product, there was no immediate danger to students and staff," Guinnane said.