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TESTIMONY OF JANE BROWNING
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA
Before the
Senate Democratic Policy Committee
An Oversight Hearing on the Administration's Mercury Pollution Rule

Tuesday, April 19, 2005
2:00-4:00 p.m.
Dirksen 430

Members of the Senate, my distinguished colleagues, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today about my concerns over the links between mercury emissions and the rising incidence of learning and other developmental disabilities. My name is Jane Browning; I am the Executive Director of the Learning Disabilities Association of America and have advocated for the rights and welfare of individuals with disabilities for 33 years.

The Learning Disabilities Association of America is a national non-profit association with approximately 20,000 members and some 200 affiliates in 41 states. 60 percent of our members are parents of children with learning disabilities; 57 percent of our members identify themselves as professionals in the field; and 25 percent of our members identify themselves as adults who have learning disabilities.

Organized by volunteer parents in 1963, LDA established a Research Committee in 1975, which promotes research and policies aimed at identifying the nature and causes of learning disabilities and reducing its incidence. LDA has avidly tracked the emerging science of children's environmental health: we know now that 2/3 of learning and other developmental disabilities are caused by genetic/environmental interactions and that increasing amounts of chemical and other toxic exposures increase the incidence of cognitive disabilities. In 2002, LDA launched its Healthy Children Project which promotes grassroots prevention activities aimed at reducing human exposure to environmental neurotoxicants: regional Healthy Children Project sites are now operating through LDA affiliates in 14 states. LDA is a founder of the national 900-member Collaborative on Health and the Environment and its Learning and Other Developmental Disabilities Initiative, and just staged a 400-participant regional Health and the Environment Conference in Pittsburgh last week with funding from the Heinz Endowments and featuring Teresa Heinz Kerry as our keynoter.

The Learning Disabilities Association of America is gravely concerned about reported increases in the number of children diagnosed with learning and other developmental disabilities, especially notable in the dramatic rise in the incidence of autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. ADHD is not technically categorized as a specific



learning disability, such as Dyslexia, but is co-morbid with learning disabilities 50% of the time and can deem a child eligible for special education services. Knowing for over a century that mercury is a potent toxicant directly affecting the nervous system, and knowing the research history of that other deadly neurotoxicant, lead, we are convinced that there exists a direct relationship between human exposure to mercury pollution – especially for women of child-bearing years – and the rising incidence of cognitive disabilities.

According to data from the National Center for Health Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control, 630,000 of the four million babies born each year in the United States are carrying body burdens of mercury above the EPA's current health threshold. In a study appearing just last month in the journal *Health and Place*, University of Texas researchers reported on the correlation of mercury emissions from local coal-burning utility plants and the incidence of autism: on average, for every 1000 pounds of environmentally released mercury, there was a 43% increase in the rate of special education services and a 61% increase in the rate of autism.

Our concern was such that LDA in concert with The Arc and the NEA Health Information Network, recently published a new brochure, *Mercury and Learning Disabilities: A Parent's Guide*, warning of the dangers of eating contaminated fish and encouraging state and local policy action to reduce mercury emissions. I have a copy of that brochure for each of you, along with a flier inviting you to participate in Senator Lautenberg's briefing on these and other environmental health issues the morning of May 10th.

What does it mean for a fetus to develop with a damaged brain? Dr. Trasande will be talking to you about the social and economic costs. As the representative of parents of children with learning disabilities and the mother of a developmentally disabled son, I'll tell you of the human and familial costs. Our children struggle and fail; they learn early to doubt themselves and experience loss and sadness and guilt; our children's frustration sometimes leads them to anger and they strike out at others, or become the target of bullies. Homework is not a night time activity, but a daily nightmare. Finding the right school, the right teacher, the right intervention system becomes a family crusade. Career paths of moms proceed in fits and starts, depending upon the disabled child's current needs. Dad's careers are hamstrung by the need to stay in or move to a better school district (and yes, people relocate every day to obtain a more fitting education, I and my family have done it ourselves). And our children's careers?

You must understand that learning and other developmental disabilities are lifelong; they do not go away. A number of highly intelligent people with severe processing disorders have become highly successful by working with and around their particular obstacles, people like Governor Gaston Caperton and Charles Schwab. But many of our children fail to get a high school diploma, especially in this era of high stakes exit exams. Many of our children struggle to master daily life activities: my son just turned 22 last week, and he still needs help to shower and shave; he'll never be able to drive. He cannot be left alone for extended periods of time, and we pay a neighborhood high school buddy \$100 a week to check in on him every afternoon. It isn't just an individual who has a disability; every family with such a child becomes in many ways a disabled family.

Conservatively estimating, 15% of American families now have that status. Do we really want to increase that burden in our midst? Not if we can help it, and we can.