

Doctors' view: On PolyMet, the priority is health

By [Drs. Susan Nordin, Emily Onello, Jennifer Pearson and Margaret Saracino](#) Nov 7, 2014
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As Duluth doctors, our first priority is the health of our patients and community. We do not align ourselves with industry or with advocacy groups. Instead, we listen, communicate and ask questions.

Just because we use a resource like copper in modern society does not mean we should refrain from asking critical questions of the industry. As physicians, we have serious questions about sulfide mining in Northeastern Minnesota and would not make statements without first educating ourselves and consulting with experts. We've done extensive reading on the issue, have reviewed the PolyMet Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement and have met with the Minnesota departments of health and natural resources. Educating ourselves only has deepened our concern.

Minnesota has no experience with sulfide mining for copper. To date, we've been unable to identify any sulfide mine that has been developed, operated and closed without producing polluted drainage. This August, a tailings dam at a British Columbia copper and gold mine failed, sending 1.3 billion gallons of contamination into local waters. With 10 percent of the world's freshwater within PolyMet's watershed, our community has a lot at risk.

We must be proactive in asking, "How will PolyMet affect the long-term health of our community?" A health risk assessment for the PolyMet project is needed to answer this question.

As Duluth doctors, our concern is shared by many other health professionals. The Minnesota Public Health Association, the Minnesota Medical Association and more than 150 individual health professionals and scientists have asked for an assessment of PolyMet health impacts. Considering that the PolyMet plan involves several of the 10 toxins of major public health concern as identified by the World Health Organization — mercury, lead, arsenic and air pollutants — we recommend a health risk assessment as part of the PolyMet environmental review to examine health risks in careful, scientific detail.

PolyMet's Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement did not give us confidence that human health will be protected. We note that information on mercury release and the potential for mercury bioaccumulation is insufficient. Mercury, a toxic metal, affects the developing brains of infants and children. Studies have shown that exposure to low levels of mercury over time affects learning, attention, memory and IQ. We know this already is a problem in our region

and that a Minnesota Department of Health study found that one in 10 newborns in Minnesota's Lake Superior basin was born with unsafe levels of mercury in the blood. This translates into behavior and learning problems for children. A recent study in the Lancet, a well-respected medical journal, discussed the rise of neurodevelopmental disabilities in children and pointed to industrial chemicals (including lead, mercury, arsenic and manganese) that injure the developing brain among the known causes for this rise in prevalence. Child and adolescent psychiatrists state that resources to address this already are strained.

More information also is needed on PolyMet's release of arsenic, lead, manganese, mineral fibers and other air pollutants. The medical literature has established clear effects of air pollution on asthma, lung and heart disease. PolyMet's proposed mine project also will result in the release of significant additional air pollution from electrical power generation used to operate the mine.

A growing number of doctors, nurses and professionals in Duluth and throughout the state want to make sure our community's health is protected before the PolyMet project is considered. We will all live with the consequences of the PolyMet project here in Northeastern Minnesota. Shouldn't we collectively expect better assurance that our health and the health of future generations is not placed at risk?

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