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Title of Defense: An Assessment of Awareness of Fish Consumption Advisories Concerning Mercury Among Women of Childbearing Age

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation describes the results of a survey that was administered to 300 undergraduate and graduate females (ages 18-40) enrolled in courses in the College of Science at a large mid-Atlantic university and 309 females (18-40) within the general public at local supermarkets in a mid-Atlantic State. The survey revealed that older women of childbearing age are more aware of the fish consumption advisories concerning mercury than are younger women, that of the ethnic groups surveyed, Hispanic women were the least aware of the fish consumption advisories concerning mercury, that mothers were more aware of these advisories than non-mothers, and that level of education was a predictor of awareness.

In addition, mothers were more likely to report reducing their fish intake due to concerns about mercury than were non-mothers. Furthermore, mothers were more likely than non-mothers to alter their fish intake because of their awareness of the advisories, though not always in recommended ways. For example, there is some evidence that some were eliminating fish, an important source of protein, from their diet. Finally, results showed

that women with more than 2 years of college were more likely to be aware of fish consumption advisories than were women with less than 2 years of college. These findings suggest that factors such as motherhood encourage alertness to fish consumption advisories and that more needs to be done to encourage awareness of the risks associated with mercury in fish by taking steps such as encouraging mothers and older females to talk about mercury in fish with younger women and targeting Hispanic and younger women with information about this health threat using social media and other channels they monitor.

Finally, the study also reports interviews that were conducted with experts from the National Fisheries Institute, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Food and Drug Administration. The interviews focused on the importance of risk assessment, perception, and management. In the opinion of these experts, the US Environmental Protection Agency and the US Food and Drug Administration should continue to use fish consumption advisories concerning mercury to protect human health. However, the communication methods used need to be constantly evaluated and improved, and innovative methods of communication are needed.