



19790627 Advocate newspaper article: Lead poisoning problems persist after centuries, by Pippa Roberts

Lead poisoning problems persist after centuries

By Pippa Roberts

Lead is the softest of the common metals. It is ductile, malleable and can be rolled into sheets or squirted into pipes. It can be cut with a knife and it will mark paper. But behind that dull, bluish-white exterior lies a toxic substance that can become a health hazard.

Lead builds up in the brain. In acute cases of lead poisoning the patient can experience mental deterioration and feel confused. If the source of the poisoning is not cut off after a lengthy period, the patient can suffer a permanent mental disability.

REVERSIBLE

Take the source away, on the other hand, and the condition is reversible — the patient will recover quickly.

Recently, concern was expressed at the link between the contents of petrol fumes and lead poisoning in children. Medical men condemned the use of lead additives in petrol.

With the expansion of the Marsden Pt oil refinery the authorities announced they intended dropping the lead content in petrol from 0.84 grams to 0.45 grams per litre. The news was welcomed.

But petrol is not the only product that can lead to lead poisoning... old paint also contains the hidden danger.

Whangarei's medical officer of health, Dr J. M. McKenzie-Pollock, said that in houses where the paint was beginning to peel, children were particularly exposed to its dangers. Toddlers were able to lean over window sills, pick off flakes of paint and chew them, thereby absorbing the lead properties. He described this as a significant source of lead poisoning.

Lead is also a health hazard to workmen involved with its industrial uses. This is particularly true in the ship building industry, Dr McKenzie-Pollock said, where old ship plates containing red lead were cut with acetylene torches.

This procedure could be dangerous if workers did not wear protective gear, he said.

POTTERY

The lead glazes used by potters can be a danger to the potter and his immediate environment.

Dr McKenzie-Pollock said most potters were responsible people and did not use lead glazes on food containers. The Department of Health had a monitoring programme, he said, and potters' products were checked for lead content.

The solder line on tin cans also contains lead. If it has not been covered with varnish on the inside, lead can be absorbed into the food the tin contains. Once again, the Department of Health monitors tin cans to make sure the lead level in food is kept low. And it also examines canning operations at their source to ensure they are well done.

Plumbers who use lead for flushing roofs are exposed to the metal's danger when

they melt it down. But most take the necessary precautions.

However, amateur fishermen who made their own sinkers by melting down lead and putting it into moulds could be working at risk, Dr McKenzie-Pollock added, as they were unaware of the potential dangers and neglected taking the protective precautions.

NOT NEW

Lead poisoning is not a new occurrence. The Egyptians knew about it and some people contend that it may have led to the downfall of the Roman Empire, Dr McKenzie-Pollock said.

The Roman upper class used pewter-ware for eating and drinking and these vessels had a high lead content. The lead was absorbed into the food. Slowly the build-up in the bloodstream of the ruling class would have caused degeneration in their mental capacity. The lower classes could not

afford pewter-ware. In England's Industrial Revolution, processes used in the manufacturing of red and white lead produced serious lead poisoning in workers.

Nowadays, Dr McKenzie-Pollock feels people are alive to the dangers of handling lead. He said people should never inhale vapour containing lead and should always wash their hands after handling a lead product in a concentrated form.

Plants such as the Marsden Pt oil refinery do vigorous, routine testing of all the workers with likely exposure to lead.

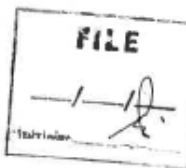
WEAKNESS

A patient suffering from the type of lead poisoning contracted through contact with old paint, the making of lead sinkers and various other operations — as opposed to poisoning related to petrol fumes — will get colic and muscle weakness.

For instance, in the old days of lead paint, painters

suffering from lead poisoning would often have trouble gripping a brush and would frequently drop it.

Although lead is no longer a major contaminant of the environment, the level must be reduced to its absolute minimum. Dr McKenzie-Pollock recommended, and the sources of lead pollution found.



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Editor's note: This 27th June 1979 Advocate newspaper article: *Lead poisoning problems persist after centuries*, by Pippa Roberts, is very comprehensive but does not mention refinery workers.