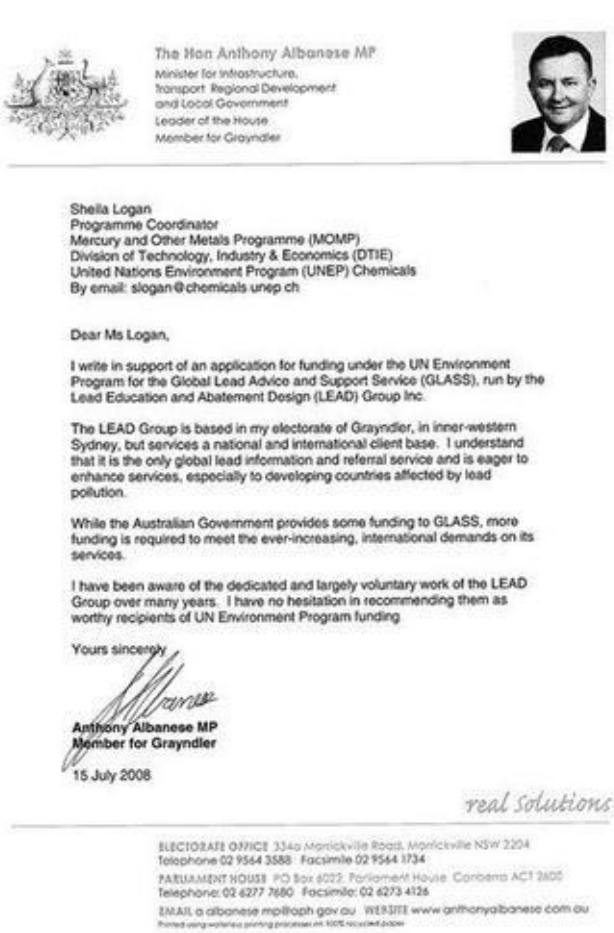
Australian Government to Prioritise Lead Safety

By Elizabeth O'Brien, Lead Scientist and Lead Advisor, orchestrated by Ian Smith, Systems Analyst, using OpenClaw on top of Claude AI and Ollama local AI models where possible, on solar-powered infrastructure. © The LEAD Group Inc. November 2026

In July 2008, a Sydney Member of Parliament (MP) wrote to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in support of a small Australian charity. The Lead Education and Abatement Design (LEAD) Group Inc (now called The LEAD Group Inc) was applying for United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) funding for its Global Lead Advice and Support Service (GLASS), and the Member for Grayndler wanted the program coordinator in Geneva to know what he thought of his constituents. "I have been aware of the dedicated and largely voluntary work of the LEAD Group over many years," he wrote. "I have no hesitation in recommending them as worthy recipients of UN Environment Program funding."

The MP was Anthony Albanese. He is now the Prime Minister of Australia. That letter, reproduced in this issue, is the starting point of a story that runs through eighteen years of correspondence and arrives, in this article, at a public commitment.



The Hon Anthony Albanese MP
Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government
Leader of the House
Member for Grayndler

Sheila Logan
Programme Coordinator
Mercury and Other Metals Programme (MOMP)
Division of Technology, Industry & Economics (DTIE)
United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Chemicals
By email: slogan@chemicals.unep.ch

Dear Ms Logan,

I write in support of an application for funding under the UN Environment Program for the Global Lead Advice and Support Service (GLASS), run by the Lead Education and Abatement Design (LEAD) Group Inc.

The LEAD Group is based in my electorate of Grayndler, in inner-western Sydney, but services a national and international client base. I understand that it is the only global lead information and referral service and is eager to enhance services, especially to developing countries affected by lead pollution.

While the Australian Government provides some funding to GLASS, more funding is required to meet the ever-increasing, international demands on its services.

I have been aware of the dedicated and largely voluntary work of the LEAD Group over many years. I have no hesitation in recommending them as worthy recipients of UN Environment Program funding.

Yours sincerely

Anthony Albanese MP
Member for Grayndler

15 July 2008

real solutions

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Then Member for Grayndler Anthony Albanese's 15 July 2008 letter recommending The LEAD Group for United Nations Environment Program funding.

Asking the question

Since 1990, The LEAD Group has assisted over 40,000 people directly, built the world's largest publicly-accessible lead library, assembled an expert Technical Advisory Board (TAB), and successfully advocated for local, state and federal education, standards and legislation to protect Australians from lead. The Federal Government, meanwhile, earned a billion dollars from the two-cent price differential (suggested by The LEAD Group, No-Lead and Greenpeace) that moved drivers from leaded to unleaded petrol, and has collected lead mining royalties and taxes throughout. Australia remains the world's largest lead exporter. Yet there has been no significant federal action on lead since the 1990s, and minimal federal funding for the charity still doing the work.

So in April 2023, The LEAD Group's co-founder Elizabeth O'Brien wrote to her local federal member, now Prime Minister, asking him to help create a lead-safe Australia by 2031. The request was modest and specific:

- a grant of $100,000 to develop a national lead-safety policy in collaboration with governments and academics; and
- a purchase order of $150,000 for LEAD Group do-it-yourself (DIY) sampling lead testing Kits for young children in public housing, in lead mining and smelting towns, and in lead-acid battery manufacturing and recycling suburbs.

An automated acknowledgement arrived. Nothing else did. The letter was resent in January 2024, then updated and sent again on 12 February 2024, this time attaching the list of The LEAD Group's fabulous Technical Advisory Board (TAB) members – every lead expert willing to volunteer their expertise from Australia, New Zealand and beyond; and citing the Model National Lead Safety Policy that the TAB had helped create in 2023. The Model Policy identifies thirty-four federal ministries with a role to play in lead safety, and is freely available as a 3-page summary at https://leadsafeworld.com/natpol-SUMMARY and in full at https://leadsafeworld.com/natpol-FULL and as from February 2026, also at https://www.leadfreefuture.org/events-and-resources/knowledge-library/lead-safe-world-model-national-lead-safety-policy - the Knowledge Library of the UNICEF Partnership for a Lead Free Future of which The LEAD Group is a partner.

The answers

What came back, over the months following The LEAD Group's third and fourth requests to Mr Albanese, was a lesson in how a question can be "answered" without saying anything that actually "answers" a charity's concerns or promotes lead-safety either in Australia or globally, as is The LEAD Group's aim.

A LEAD Group client, Rosemary, sent the February 2024 LEAD Group letter to her own MP, the Independent Member for Indi, Dr Helen Haines, along with a personal letter of her own (extracts of Rosemary's redacted letter are reproduced below). The response from the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP (redacted and reproduced below Rosemary's letter), enclosed the Health Department's 2019 reply to an earlier letter from Rosemary and confirmed that the advice of 2019 was "still applicable": all Commonwealth grants are offered as a result of identified need across government priorities through an open competitive process, and The LEAD Group should register on the GrantConnect website to be notified of new grant opportunities despite the promotion of lead-safety either in Australia or in Australian lead-importing countries or those countries that later receive Australian lead in various leaded waste streams like lead batteries and e-waste not having been identified as a priority of the Australian government.

Rosemary Hon Helen Haines letter 20240219 extracts re The LEAD Group Inc



Dr Helen Haines, MP helen.haines.mp@aph.gov.au

…

On 18 April 2008, acting upon that advice, I contacted The LEAD Group Inc. charity and spoke to a wonderful woman called Elizabeth O'Brien in Sydney. Ms O'Brien was the only person who could identify with my immediate concerns and offered the most appropriate professional advice when I was unable to get any other assistance/information regarding identifying the source of our son's lead toxicity from any government agency or other source at this point.

Ms O'Brien was able to quickly email me a list of contact details for NATA (National Association of Testing Authorities) accredited lead assessors in Victoria and also advised that The LEAD Group sells Kits for DIY sampling for home and school lead assessments if I was unable to get professional support.

You may be aware that the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) website has a booklet: *Lead Alert – The six step guide to painting your home -5th Edition* (2014). Whilst it is pleasing that this booklet that The LEAD Group helped to write and update four times is readily available online for other Federal and State government departments, it is in grave need of updating.

I read this very informative booklet online in 2008 during our investigations for the lead source for our son. At the time, the Fourth Edition of this excellent booklet unfortunately did not contain any information for NATA registered Analytical Laboratories for Lead Paint Testing in the state of Victoria, whereas the fifth edition mentions LEAD Group Kits multiple times. These Kits involve the collection of samples which are tested at a NATA-accredited lab.

Given our experience, I can seriously vouch for this Sydney-based information and referral service of The LEAD Group regarding lead exposure and contamination prevention and management. It is certainly better to talk to a highly professional and extremely knowledgeable person than frantically 'Googling' or thumbing through the 'Yellow Pages' when your child is clinically lead poisoned and his Paediatrician is urgently advising that time is essential for finding the lead source/s.

The LEAD Group and associated volunteers have a long-standing history of applying for federal funding and occasionally receiving it since beginning as the Community Lead Information Centre (CLIC) in Sydney, opened by the then NSW Health Minister Dr Andrew Refshauge in 1992 and receiving federal funding for LeadLine in 1995. In fact, then PM Malcolm Turnbull approved the most recent round of federal-based funding in FYs 2007-2013. Sadly, I never received an answer to my 18th October 2018 letter to the then Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt seeking Federal funding for The LEAD Group, so they've been unfunded for a decade.

The LEAD Group's commitment to providing appropriate advice and evidence-based information is easily available to anyone who may be affected by environmental lead, whether they are local or global, individuals/families, or community organisations (including NGOs and government). Due to volunteers, such as Ms O'Brien and countless others, The LEAD Group has achieved remarkable progress in Australian and global lead-safety via collaboration and consultation with Australian agencies and internationally recognised global health and environmental organisations such as WHO, United Nations, and NGOs such as UK-based LEAPP Alliance, Lead Aware NZ, US-based Unleaded Kids, Leadnet and global IPEN.

Despite the Poisons Information and other national call centres, such as Dulux Paints, and state and local agencies such as NSW EPA and councils, have for over 30 years referred every enquirer on lead issues to The LEAD Group, from what I understand, The LEAD Group will run out of funds by the end of March 2024.

I'm concerned that without funding, Ms O'Brien, who is the Lead Scientist and co-Founder of The LEAD Group, will be unable "to work to make the world lead-safe" due to burnout due to a lack of funding - which would provide her with much needed support staff. I am worried that we will lose this precious expertise and guidance, and families like my own will experience lead poisoning without any sound advice on testing and how to reduce lead exposure and blood lead levels.

Recently, I became aware that this organisation's application for ongoing funding to PM Anthony Albanese (see The LEAD Group letters dated 11th April 2023 and 12th February 2024 attached) have not received any response.

This is the reason for my letter to you. I am seeking your support to advocate for the $250,000 funding that The LEAD Group has requested, especially since there is a lack of support and formal structures in place in Australia to deal with the issue of lead management, by developing a National Lead Safety Policy and immediately putting LEAD Group Kits into the hands of local professionals who can help the 500 most needy Australians, especially Indigenous families to locate lead sources in their homes, childcare centres, playgrounds, schools, etc, plus receive Ms O'Brien's invaluable advice and referrals on how to totally prevent lead exposure or reduce blood lead levels in themselves and their children.

I would ask you to consider asking questions in Parliament and/or putting out a media release on The LEAD Group's need for urgent and ongoing funding.

I trust that my experience has provided you with additional insight into the valuable work, advice and information The LEAD Group provides in personal, local and global ways. I have provided contact details of The LEAD Group at the end of this letter.

…

I look forward to your reply regarding the urgent need for immediate and continuing funding for The LEAD Group and for a National Lead Safety Policy and in the meantime, I am very happy to discuss any of these other more personal matters with you anytime.

Yours sincerely
Rosemary

CC: Elizabeth O'Brien, The LEAD Group Inc

19th February 2024

_____[end of redacted letter from Rosemary]





The Hon Mark Butler MP
Minister for Health and Aged Care

Ref No: MC24-003139

Dr Helen Haines MP
Member for Indi
17 Murphy Street
WANGARATTA VIC 3677
helen.haines.mp@aph.gov.au

Dear Dr ~~Haines~~ Helen

Thank you for your correspondence of 27 February 2024 on behalf of Ms Rosemary *[surname redacted]*, regarding lead toxicity and the LEAD Group Inc.

I can appreciate Ms *[surname redacted]*'s concerns about the potential effects of lead on a person's health. I have enclosed a previous response from the Department of Health and Aged Care to Ms *[surname redacted]* in 2019.

I recognise the importance of preventing and, where required, managing exposure to hazardous substances to protect human health. All levels of government play a role in managing lead contamination to minimise the impact on the environment and people.

You may be aware the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) reviewed the evidence on the health effects and management of lead exposure in humans. The review outlined a national recommendation for all Australians to have a blood lead level below 10 micrograms per decilitre.

In addition, the NHMRC is reviewing the lead fact sheet in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines to determine if the current health-based guideline value for lead in drinking water remains protective of health. The review considers recent guidance from other agencies, as well as recent peer-reviewed publications, on health effects from exposure to lead in drinking water. This work is being overseen by experts on the Water Quality Advisory Committee.

The Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water is the relevant department which conducts a range of activities to assess the environmental impacts of chemicals, develops guidance on managing chemicals of concern, and works with businesses to improve the way chemicals are managed. The Minister for the Environment and Water, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, would be the right point of contact to raise any concerns specific to the Australian Government's management of the environment and water.

On funding, I can confirm the advice Ms *[surname redacted]* was provided in 2019 is still applicable. All funding for Commonwealth grants is offered because of an identified need through an open competitive process. I would encourage the LEAD Group Inc. to register on the whole-of-government website GrantConnect (www.grants.gov.au) to be notified of new grant opportunities as they become available.

Thank you for writing on this matter.

Yours sincerely



Mark Butler

19 / 03 / 2024

Encl (1)

cc: The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, Prime Minister
The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for the Environment and Water
The Hon Ged Kearney MP, Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care

_____[end of redacted letter from Mark Butler]

The Prime Minister's office referred The LEAD Group's February 2024 letter to the Department of Health and Aged Care, whose Assistant Secretary, Stephen Bouwhuis from the newly created Australian Centre for Disease Control (Australian CDC - not ACDC which is a rock band!) replied on 2nd April 2024 in almost identical terms. Register on GrantConnect. Wait for a grant to appear. The catch, as O'Brien pointed out in her next letter to the Prime Minister on 8 April 2024, is a perfect circle: unless lead safety becomes a government priority, no grant for lead safety will ever be offered, and registering on GrantConnect simply means being notified of grants for other things, forever.

The Treasury's 12 July 2024 reply pointing The LEAD Group to the Pre-Budget Submission process.



Australian Government
The Treasury

Ref: MC24-006845

Dr Elizabeth O'Brien
Lead Scientist and Lead Advisor
The LEAD Group

info@lead.org.au

Dear Dr O'Brien

Thank you for your correspondence of 12 February 2024 and 8 April 2024, originally directed to the Prime Minister, concerning funding for lead safety initiatives. Your correspondence has been referred to the Treasury. I apologise for the delay in responding.

Lead safety falls within the portfolio responsibilities of the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP. I understand your letter of 12 February 2024 was referred to the Department of Health and Aged Care, and Mr Stephen Bouwhuis responded with advice regarding Commonwealth grants processes and existing work within the Department of Health and Aged Care relating to lead safety.

The Treasury supports Mr Bouwhuis' advice and is not able to provide any further information on these matters. I encourage you to engage with Minister Butler and the Department of Health and Aged Care on lead safety issues.

Other avenues for funding from Government include funding from the Budget process. The Government's Pre-Budget submission process is the official avenue for individuals, businesses and community groups to contribute ideas for priorities for the Commonwealth Budget. Submissions provided to the Government are considered as part of the development of the Budget and are important inputs into this process.

You may want to consider providing a Pre-Budget submission for the 2025-26 Budget. Details on how to make a submission will be provided on the Treasury website closer to the Budget process.

Once again, thank you for taking the time to write.

Yours sincerely

Mark Burton
Director
Budget Policy Division

CC: Office of the Hon Anthony Albanese MP, Prime Minister and Member for Grayndler

treasury.gov.au

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The door left open

The LEAD Group's April 2024 letter was referred to the Treasurer, and on 12 July 2024 the Treasury's Budget Policy Division replied. Most of the letter restated what had already been said. But its fourth paragraph said something new, and it is worth quoting in full: "The Government's Pre-Budget submission process is the official avenue for individuals, businesses and community groups to contribute ideas for priorities for the Commonwealth Budget. Submissions provided to the

Government are considered as part of the development of the Budget and are important inputs into this process."

Read one way, this is another polite redirection. Read the other way, it is the Treasury telling The LEAD Group, in writing, exactly which door to walk through. Grants follow priorities. Priorities are set in the Budget. The official avenue for proposing a Budget priority is a Pre-Budget Submission. The full correspondence trail, from 2008 to 2024, is reproduced in this issue so readers can judge for themselves. Do you think an Australian government will develop the sense of a duty of care to its own citizens for relentlessly allowing lead exposure to continue from lead mining and smelting operations and from the historical lead contamination to be found in paint on industrial infrastructure and all homes built prior to 1997, and more especially, a duty of care towards the recipients of Australian lead which includes every country in the world where leaded AvGas is still used, ie every country with a general aircraft airport.

The commitment

So here is the plan, in print, where it cannot be quietly dropped.

The LEAD Group will lodge its first ever Pre-Budget Submission, for the 2027-28 federal Budget. In recent years the submission process has opened around 21 November and closed at the end of January, which means the writing starts now. The submission will ask the Government to fund what the correspondence has been asking for since 2023:

- a multi-agency lead-safety task force to turn the Model National Lead Safety Policy into national policy; and
- 
  a purchase order for LEAD Group Kits so that the families who most need lead testing, including Indigenous families in whom lead-safety has enormous potential to help Close the Gap, can get it free.

2025 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry. Artist: Grandma Lead. Title: Closing the Gap. Lead-Safety Message: "The LEAD Group seeks to Close the Gap (in health, education and justice between First Nations and more recently arrived Australians) by offering a free 8-Sample LEAD Group Kit to anyone wishing to collect samples which could lead to the reduction of lead exposure in Indigenous Australians. To take up our offer, please fill in the form at https://leadsafeworld.com/free-lead-group-kits-for-indigenous-australians or phone freecall 1800 626 086." Description of Work: Message from www.leadsafeworld.com/shop/ and iPhone 13 photos of grasstree flower spikes growing closer together as they get higher off the ground, collaged in Powerpoint and Word. https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/closing-the-gap/ [LID 28941]

The economic case writes itself. In 2022, the Group of Seven (G7) nations recognised an estimate of the global cost of the health effects of lead exposure at 4.6 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), which for Australia implies a cost in the order of $100 billion every year. The World Health Organization reported in 2010 that every dollar spent preventing lead exposure returns between $17 and $220 in benefits. The LEAD Group's request amounts to $250,000. Few line items in any Budget would carry a benefit-cost ratio like this one.

And the 2008 letter will be quoted in the submission. The Prime Minister once had no hesitation in recommending The LEAD Group as worthy of United Nations funding. The submission will respectfully ask his Government to show the same confidence.

What you can do

Budget priorities respond to public voices. If lead has touched your family, or if you are simply astounded that no one warned you about lead paint in pre-1997 homes or lead-contaminated ceiling dust in buildings from before leaded petrol was eliminated in 2002, write a personal letter to the Prime Minister and/or your local federal MP and/or submit your own Pre-Budget Submission. Tell them how you found out about lead, why you needed to know earlier, how you came across The LEAD Group and what information or referrals you received from us that you had found nowhere else, and that you want lead safety funded in the 2027-28 Budget.

The LEAD Group's and Rosemary's letters show the way; yours could tip the balance.



2025 Volcano Art Prize (VAP) Entry. Artist: Benji Muthukrishna, Age 8, School: Creative Einstein. Title: Palm Islands Sunrise. Lead-Safety Message: "Indigenous Australians such as those living on Palm Island, are more likely to have higher blood lead levels than non-Indigenous Australians. Governments should make efforts to test blood lead levels in order to Close the Gap for a brighter tomorrow." https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/palm-islands-sunrise/ [LID 28881]

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