Q&A Grandma Lead Wisdom on Lead Issues in Oz



Initial Q: (Wednesday, September 2, 2026) I'm seeking justice for childhood lead poisoning at an old house in an inner-city suburb next door to a dust bowl that had been a petrol station. I'm doing full time research to heal and want to write my story and be part of advocacy around this issue. What information would you like to know about my lead toxicity story? And why? The 'why' may help me give you more targeted information.

Before I learnt about your amazing group I had been trying to learn about the political history of lead exposure in urban home settings in Australia. I struggled to find good content online on the topic. I had started drafting my story, with an emphasis on the failings of the medical system. When I got up to researching the modern history of lead, the more I read about it, the more shocked I got regarding the scale of the issue.

However, your newsletter archive looks massive! I've only opened a couple of them so far. To give you a sense of the questions I had been seeking answers to...

- The political history of Australian regulatory and medical inaction on lead exposure in urban home settings. For example, if the U.S. EPAs Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) laws existed in Australia, my parents would have known about the risks and I would have never been lead poisoned. Why wasn't the RRP introduced here?

- Why does the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) prefer to see the public poisoned rather than sounding the alarm?

- Why doesn't the medical system check for lead/heavy metal toxicity in their patients with chronic illness?

- Estimates of the extent that lead is contributing to the rise of chronic and degenerative illness.

- Are there articles estimating the extent and impact of lead poisoning today? The number of kids growing up in old homes being renovated etc?

I'm guessing answers to some of these will be in your archive.

Answer emailed by Elizabeth O'Brien, aka Grandma Lead, The LEAD Group Inc, Australia, on Wednesday, September 2, 2026

It was fascinating to talk to you and yes, I am generally available between 10am and 4pm Mon-Fri during which times calling our office numbers means your call comes thru to my mobile.

Yes, even the most recent issues of LEAD Action News at our newest website www.leadsafeworld.com/media are a massive archive but you've probably also seen the full list of 94 LEAD Action News (LAN) issues over 34 years at our original website www.lead.org.au/nl.html – which is truly overwhelming. I navigate myself, every day,

through the information we've gathered together on those two websites and our images with lead-safety messages website www.volcanoartprize.com by using the Search/Find functions on each site looking for keywords or phrases in inverted commas.

But here I go creating a bit of a brief overview for you, with my opinions (sometimes unavoidably cynical) in answer to your questions:



Q – What should go in my case history article for LEAD Action News (LAN)?

A – Anything to do with lead or other heavy metals that you can back up with data or references or family memories or even images, and that helps you to feel heard and that might just help another reader or another million readers to avoid the same pitfalls. I find that images tell so much more than just words so much so that I founded our photo competition Volcano Art Prize (VAP) which requires a landscape-orientation 1-3MB image and very short title and 1-2 sentence Lead-Safety Message. VAP just closed last week but is already open for 2027 so it would be great if could upload at https://volcanoartprize.com/submitentry/ or email me an entry or two or three in the next two days maximum so you too can be part of VAP. The way I decide what would make a great VAP entry is to start composing a fact sheet or a LAN article or a report and figure out what would illustrate it perfectly.

Q - The political history of Australian regulatory and medical inaction on lead exposure in urban home settings. For example, if the U.S. EPAs RRP laws existed in Australia, my parents would have known about the risks and I would have never been poisoned. Why wasn't the RRP introduced here?

A – unlike Australia where people don't sue for fear of losing their home, the US is a litigious society where millions of dollars have been awarded to thousands of individual lead poisoned people since the 1960s at least, plus their constitution gives powers to the national government, such that the US federal government has stepped in to legislate, for instance the Clean Air Act (which initiated the introduction of unleaded auto-fuel and the phase-out of leaded auto-fuel), occupational lead exposure, Title X (residential tenancy and home-buyer notification of home lead hazards), RRP (to ensure lead abatement contractors and assessors are licensed), Consumer product safety regulations (which mandate lead testing of imported goods and other goods for sale) and a myriad of other legislation.

Additionally, states such as California can create their own more stringent regulations on all these matters, for instance Proposition 65 has ensured that dozens of leaded products first stopped being sold in California, then in the rest of the US. The Australian constitution ensures that our federal government is spineless and simply can't make such national regulations (they make standards instead or "guidance") and doesn't even feel they have a major role in setting standards except with the agreement of the states and territories, such that every so-called nationalized act or regulation, such as WHS or Tenancy acts/regulations, has to be adopted/called up in state and territory legislation before it is law, and basically satisfies only the lowest common denominator, such as, what South Australia wants as a blood lead action level so that it doesn't have to spend too much on dealing with lead

poisoning cases (the lower the blood lead action level the more lead poisoning cases need follow-up) and can spend its revenue from lead smelting on other priorities.



Q – Australian States and Territories do have the power to regulate for example on Asbestos, so why haven't we got good lead regulations like California does for instance, or even New York City lead regulations?

A – There's a "she'll be right" Oz attitude and almost complete dearth of blood lead testing, very rare state blood lead surveillance analysis and zero national CDC blood lead surveillance or interest. When I looked on the website of the fairly newly created Australian Centre for Disease Control (CDC) I found zero about lead. In any Centre for Disease Control worth the name, all blood lead results (from non-detectable up to more than the notifiable blood lead "action level" would be collected and collated and analysed, with standard information like gender, age, location, year of construction of residence, lead-related occupational or hobby or other potential lead-exposure sources (like smoking, vaping, drinking more alcohol than average, etc), and the analysis would be frequently and widely distributed to every doctor and relevant specialist in the country, as well as being written up for lead poisoning prevention awareness campaigns.

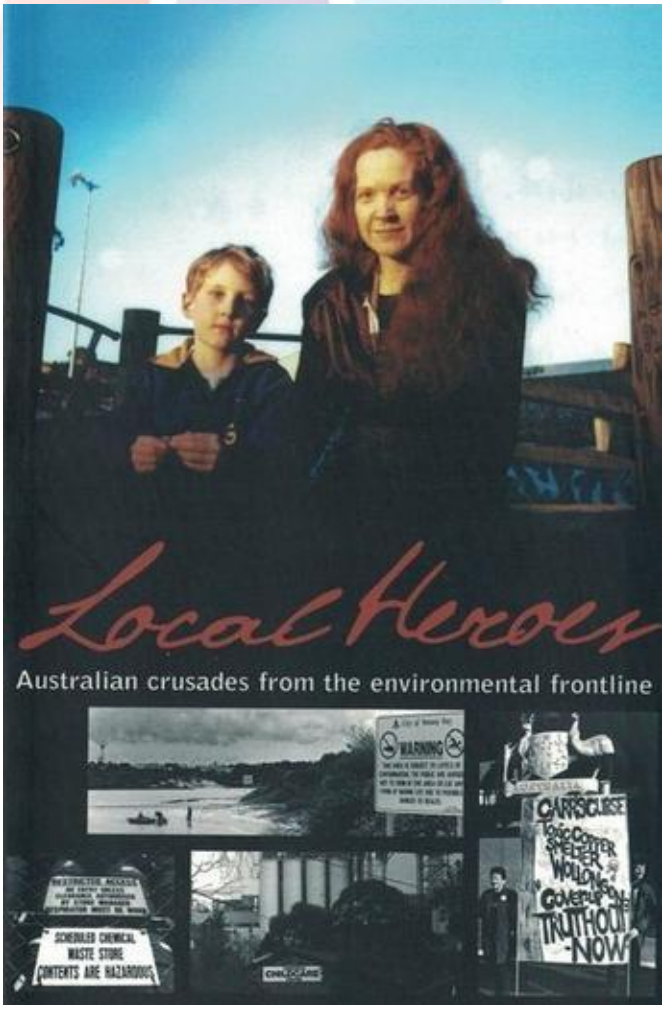
Q - Why does the NHMRC prefer to see the public poisoned rather than sounding the alarm?

A - That's because the NHMRC, being an apparently powerless federal government agency, has been overly influenced by the imperative of state but especially South Australian Health department officials who want to keep their jobs in SA Health (or who literally work for NHMRC which carried some influence over even WHO's lead policy for many years while Dr Keith Bentley was in charge of the lead strategy at the NHMRC) so that they can protect state lead mining royalties and protect SA's lead concentrate export income and employee and corporate taxes flowing from the world's most productive lead mining town of Broken Hill in NSW (which sends all its ore to Port Pirie), the world's largest lead smelter town of Port Pirie, SA and generally all the lead mines in Australia which allows Australia to be the world's largest lead exporter.

Q - Why doesn't the medical system check for lead/heavy metal toxicity for chronic illness?

A – Unlike in the US, no Medicaid program mandates blood lead testing by doctors and instead, our doctors generally believe that lead poisoning is a thing of the past and lead exposure at lower blood lead levels than whatever the level of concern is at the time, is "normal". Doctor education about lead in Australia, I'm told by doctors, amounts to perhaps one hour's tuition (along with one hour spent on nutrition) in a 6 year medical degree. One of The LEAD Group's early advocacy successes was that two members of our Technical Advisory

Board were given the opportunity to write a booklet on lead for doctor continuing education, which was published by the NHMRC and a physical copy was posted to every working General Practitioner in 1994. Since then, our guy, Prof Garth Alperstein (who was the Central Sydney Area Health Service paediatrician who investigated why my home had caused my youngest son to have a blood lead level of 31ug/dL aged one in 1991) has made valiant efforts at educating medical students and doctors-in-practice but there is no general requirement that students are taught about lead or that practicing doctors ever learn or update their learning on lead. You can read about my family's lead journey and the first 10 years of The LEAD Group's work in *Chapter 1 - The LEAD Group: Responding to the problem of lead contamination* from the book: Local Heroes: Australian Crusades from the Environmental Frontline (Pluto Press, 2002) [LID 387] at https://lead.org.au/lanv14n2/lanv14n2-11.html and at the same link you can listen to *Local Heroes Chapter 1* read by Voice Actor Alex Jewson [LID 29852].



The LEAD Group was invited in 2010 to answer students' questions and hand out fact sheets specifically written for medical students at University of NSW Medical School, which we did each time the community health event was held up until this year when clearly, someone there decided that the students of today don't need to know about lead. I'm going to protest our sudden exclusion from this doctor education opportunity so your case could make a good example as to why it is so important that they invite The LEAD Group back.

Q - Estimates of the extent that lead is contributing to the rise of chronic and degenerative illness.

A – There's so much out there on this but a good place to start is:

"Lead poisoning impairs more children globally than any other single hazard" by Abdullah A. Fadil, Director, Partnership for a Lead-Free Future (PLF) [of which The LEAD Group is a partner], at https://leadsafeworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/LANv23n2-03.pdf [LID 29140 (where LID means Library Identifier from The LEAD Group's Library, half of which – the online half - is now fully searchable at https://www.lead.org.au/library/ ; ACCESSIBLE VIA https://lead.org.au/fs-index.html];

"Three more US studies show lead linked to higher dementia risk", at https://leadsafeworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/LANv23n3-11.pdf [LID 29261]

"Lead is an issue beyond childhood: A fact sheet by LEAD Group volunteer Emily Choong, using extracts of media articles about the landmark Lancet lead article by Lanphear et al, March 2018", at https://leadsafeworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/LANv21n1-11.pdf [LID 19130]

Q - Are there articles estimating the extent and impact of lead poisoning today? The number of kids growing up in old homes being renovated etc?

A - Pure Earth is a relative late-comer to the field of global lead-safety advocacy but they do seem to have a knack for obtaining massive amounts of funding and putting together wonderfully on-the-money lead health data. For example, less than a month ago they emailed about their CEO Drew McCartor giving a TED Talk:

The response has been overwhelming. Since its release, Drew 's TED Talk has been watched 187,000 times, with messages of support pouring in from partners, donors, and new viewers encountering Pure Earth's work for the first time.

In the TED Talk Drew reveals how lead poisoning is permanently damaging the developing brains of more than a billion children and lays out a plan to cut that exposure for 500 million children using tools we already have.

If you haven't watched it yet, now's the time, and if you have, please consider sharing it. Every view helps carry this message further

Watch The Talk



Q - Have people tried to get accountability for childhood lead exposure in Australia?

A - One police family living in police housing got a settlement but had to sign an NDA so no one can use that information and motivate other police officers to make claims. One carpenter or electrician in Queensland had some mates he knew through his renovation work come and strip paint from his home and despite his two daughters being hospitalised with lead poisoning, he said he couldn't sue for fear of not only losing his house to cover the lawyer's costs but also for fear of being blacklisted in the building trades. Even the paint contractor who was also hospitalised with lead poisoning wouldn't sue his boss for fear of losing his means of making a living.

Elizabeth aka Grandma Lead