Growing up in the Broken Hill Lead Program in the early 1990s

Letter to the Editor from Max Mawby, 13 October 2025

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Hi Elizabeth

Here's a bit of history which sadly is only repeating. A lead story in the Who Weekly from April 1992.







My wife Loren is in the opening group photo as a kid with her 2 brothers and her dad. Her family used to be a part of the Broken Hill community lead program back in the 1990's.

Regards, Max Mawby, Organiser

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TROUBLE IN THE AIR
Broken Hill residents battle the toxic dusting of lead that drifts across their town – by Jane Nicholls, WHO Weekly, April 8, 1992. [LID 24081]

TROUBLE IN THE AIR

Broken Hill residents battle the toxic dusting of lead that drifts across their town ▪ by Jane Nicholls

THE BREEZE THROUGH THE WINdow gently lifts the Thomas the Tank Engine curtains in Aaron Turley's bedroom. The three-year-old is showing a visitor around his house in Broken Hill, NSW, proudly pointing out his Thomas toys, books and bedcover. Aaron then scuffs up the hallway to the lounge room, where he and sister Erica, 20 months, scatter toy guns, Big Bird plastic cameras and mini pianos across the carpet. Dennis and Kym Turley, smiling proudly, are the overseers of this picture of Australian familial bliss.

But the breezes are not exactly sweet in this outback centre, pop. 21,000. Broken Hill's rich lead and zinc mines form the backbone of the city's economy, but they are also at least one of the causes of the frighteningly high blood-lead levels in some of the local children. "If you look out the window," says Dennis, 32, peering across King Street from the home he and Kym purchased for $55,000 eight years ago, "you can see the dust blowing now through the trees. That's from the North Mine skimp dump."

Skimp dumps are huge mounds of earth that have had most of the lead and zinc mined out, leaving behind small amounts of heavy metals. Once airborne, the fine dust from the skimps can create biological havoc. Inhaled or consumed, lead can cause a staggering variety of health problems, including irritability, learning difficulties, headache, sleep disturbances, kidney damage and anaemia. Young children are at greatest risk because their central nervous systems are still developing.

Broken Hill residents have long known that their city had an annoying dust problem. But when they learnt that there was lead dust breezing through their community, they were scared and angry. Finally, the region's Public Health Unit arranged for blood-lead level tests for Broken Hill children aged between 12 months and 4 years. In January, it reported that of the 899 children tested, nearly 20 per cent had blood-lead levels that exceeded the "level of concern"—25 micrograms of lead per 100 ml of blood—set by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

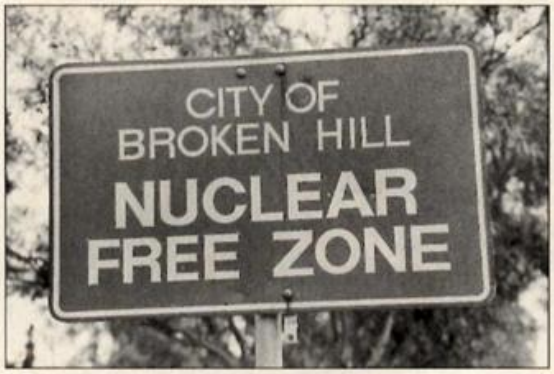
Last week, Joanne Boog, 34, founder and president of the Broken Hill environmental group Back to Basics, delivered a petition signed by nearly 5,000 community members to NSW Environment Minister Tim Moore. It asks the NSW government to come up with funding—around $250,000 is needed—for research into the sources of the lead problem, decontamination methods and an immediate clean-up program. Boog doesn't want to condemn the mines, which now only employ about 1,350 people. "But," she says, "we've had it up to here." Boog hopes the petition will at least spark a parliamentary debate on the issue.

What Broken Hill residents want first is some concrete information. They know that their toddlers, who crawl about close to the ground and play in high-lead dirt, are especially vulnerable to overexposure. And they know that the sick, old or pregnant are at greater risk as well. They know that residents living in South Broken Hill, closest to the mines and the lead-rich ore body called the "line of lode", tend to have higher readings than others. But they don't know what the long-term effects will be, what the future will hold for them or their children.

Peter Black, 48, Broken Hill's mayor, has endorsed his council being represented on the local Environmental Health Steering Committee that is reporting to state government on the lead issue, but he still thinks all the fuss is much ado about nothing. "We feel we're being singled out for media attention generated by a few malcontents in Broken Hill," he says. "It's a problem that's grossly exaggerated."

The blood test results tell a different story. Dr Mark Jacobs, who directed the initial round of testing in Broken Hill, says, "The main [thing] we are concerned with here is the effect of chronic low-level exposure and how that can affect [a child's] intellect and behaviour." While above the "level of concern", even the highest lead levels in Broken Hill are not at the acutely toxic level, says Jacobs.

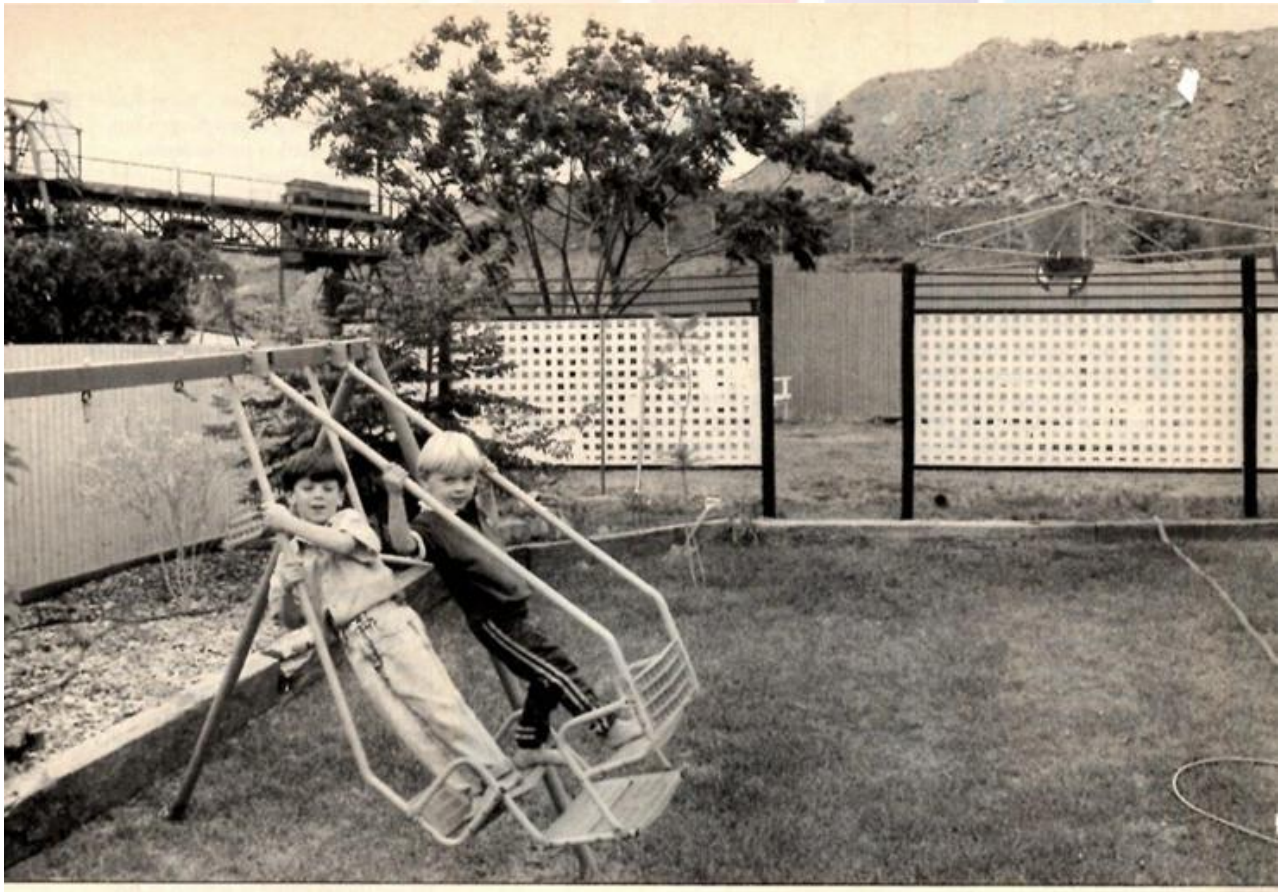
Lead poisoning is "a bloody subtle thing", agrees Broken Hill GP Don Howarth, who is on the steering committee. He is also assisting Dr Brian Gulson, the chief research scientist in the CSIRO's Division of Exploration and Geoscience, with ongoing tests to determine the sources of lead contamination. Gulson's highly sophisticated isotope "fingerprinting" can determine whether the source of lead is mine dust, food, water, paint or petrol. Gulson discourages Broken Hill parents from quickly linking high lead levels to the mines alone. And Howarth points out that, regardless of the source of the lead, behavioural problems—such as hyperactivity and impaired learning—can just as easily be traced to genetics or upbringing. Nevertheless, a report about to be re-



◄ One of many concerned "Hillers", in front of MMM's South Mine, says, "We want to go on living [here], but we aren't happy putting our children's lives at risk."

➤ Broken Hill mayor Peter Black defends his city, saying, "Sydney is a lot more polluted."

Photographs by Stephen Ellison/Outline Press



leased by the CSIRO's Adelaide-based Division of Human Nutrition suggests that lead *does* have a lasting effect on intellect. The long-term study looked at some 500 children living near a lead smelter at Port Pirie, SA, and has found that the children with the highest exposure to lead showed small but significant intellectual lags in development, according to Dr Peter Baghurst, one of the report's authors.

Results from that study have Broken Hill residents more up in arms than ever. They are pressuring Keith Chilman, the city's senior inspector of mines and chairman of the steering committee, to quickly finish a report he is writing recommending that further state funds for testing and decontamination be made available. Chilman concedes that he has been tardy in making his report, adding, "If I had a kid with a high lead level, I'd be looking at getting out of here."

Erica Turley—dragging her brother's Thomas the Tank Engine colouring book around by its dog-ears—is the cherubic face on the dilemma. Her first test gave a reading five points above the level of concern. Her levels rose another point on a second test. (Aaron, identical to Erica on his first test, dropped to the borderline of concern with his second.) Kym and Dennis are just thankful that the children haven't exhibited any obvious signs of lead toxicity so far. But even if they did, the alternatives for the family would be few. "We've got commitments here, so we just can't up and leave," says Kym, 31, who has lived in Broken Hill all her life.

The Turleys' home sits half a kilometre from the lead-rich line of lode and about the same distance from a skimp dump. Some Broken Hill residents, including Mayor Black, point to old houses (with lead paint and accumulated lead dust in the ceiling) or poor hygiene as the source of the lead, and "Hillers" generally agree that the mines are not the only problem. But the Turleys' home was built in 1975, and Dennis, who cleans and repairs railway lines on mining land, follows a strict clean-up routine each day.

"My children don't come in contact with Dennis's work clothes," says Kym. "On Fridays [the only day Dennis brings his work clothes home], he always enters through the back door and automatically puts his clothes in the washing machine. The washing machine gets immediately turned on. They say some of [the lead remains] in the washing machine, so before I do our normal wash I rinse out what's in there. I damp dust, I vacuum every day, I wash floors every day."

The Turleys complain that the state government has swept the problem in their community under the rug. "I think the NSW government reckons far west is as far as Dubbo," says Dennis, "and beyond that is no man's land. If they do anything [to help], it will only be a token."

"High-lead" parents meet regularly in Broken Hill to air their concerns. Today, a group gathers in Joanne Boog's garden. Julee Mann's son Nicholas, 5, was bang on the level of concern when he was first tested, but Benjamin, 4, came up with almost



➤ These Broken Hill brothers tested above the "level of concern" set by the National Health and Medical Research Council. Their home, which is located at the foot of a skinp dump, is up for sale.

➤ Frequent hand-washing is recommended, to reduce contamination. It cost $400 to fit this special basin outside one family's back door. "We became quite paranoid," says the mother of this boy.

twice that. Julee, 40, tells the group that, compared with her two older children, her youngsters are more volatile emotionally. She worries that low-level lead poisoning could be the cause: "[My boys have] chronic mood changes, from being happy and then, by somebody just saying the wrong word, to tears, to genuinely, really emotionally upset." The Manns live in a home once owned by a mine manager, located right next to the mine.

"Last year," Julee says, "we bought a poodle, and within eight weeks we had to give him away because he got really sick and was vomiting and had diarrhoea. I rang the RSPCA. They suggested we have a blood test done. He was twice the toxic level for dogs."

The story about the poodle falls into the category of tales that regularly circulate in Broken Hill and frighten parents most. It's an account that gives some credence to the fear among Hillers that they've taken up residence with a poison. Many whispers blow about the community: unexplained child deaths, "lost" test results, babies born blind. Some contain a gust of truth, others are the rumours of people who are genuinely afraid.

While waiting and hoping for help from the state, residents are coping by declaring war on lead dust. Keeping the dust down is a constant, wearing battle. "You'd be amazed at what [mining companies and medical advisers] are telling people to do," says resident Carmel Williams, 29, mother of 14-month-old Eliza (who was too young to be tested in the government round-up). "It's just phenomenal. It's dusting daily if possible or at least two times a week. Vacuuming the same amount and vacuuming when children are not in the room, which is pretty hard when you've got one my age. And [you're supposed to] grass all areas within the [yard] and make sure you rinse the grass regularly."

Dennis and Kym Turley are trying to give their children the best chance they can by adhering to the stringent cleaning regime they've established in their home. But the fact that they live in high-risk South Broken Hill is something they can't change. They've considered selling their house—not to move away from the city they love, but to move to a safer part of town. "But who wants to buy our home?" asks Kym, trying to grab Erica as she speeds out of the lounge room to collect more toys. "South is supposed to be *the* high-risk area, and I wouldn't like to sell my home to a family with young children."

The Turleys, like other Broken Hill residents, live with the worry. "They reckon it affects their brains," says Kym, running her fingers through her daughter's hair, "that they won't take in as much as what a child without lead will. That's what worries me, because in years to come they're going to need their education." ■



➤ Happy Day Pre-School workers follow health precautions that include covering the sandpit after playtime.



➤ Kym and Dennis Turley, with tots Erica and Aaron, are matter-of-fact about their plight: "It's a bit hard to sell and pack up."