

# NEWS AND COMMENT

## UNLEADED PETROL AND BENZENE

**A** Clever Country – The Health Benefits of Removing Lead from Petrol<sup>1</sup> in the *Bulletin* was a sensible article as far as it went. It quotes the NHMRC as advocating the increased use of unleaded petrol and accelerated reduction of lead in petrol. Further, it reports that the Lead in Petrol Working Group is considering an education campaign be instituted to encourage owners of pre-1986 cars to switch to using unleaded petrol (for those models which can do so).

It is disappointing that Stephen Corbett and Christine Cowie of the Environmental Health Section responsible for the article appear to be unaware of reports from Europe that the use of unleaded petrol without a catalytic converter constitutes an increased risk of leukaemia. The culprit is said to be carcinogenic benzene which is discharged in the exhaust if no catalytic converter is used. In addition, the additive MTBE in unleaded petrol is reported to have been found in the environment as a result of leaking underground petrol station tanks.

The National Society for Clean Air in Britain is reported now to feel that 'to represent unleaded fuel as greener than leaded is misleading'. Professor Roger Perry, of the Imperial College, London, is quoted as saying: "If I had the option of being exposed to low levels of lead or very low levels of benzene, I would go for the lead any time."

Donald Scott-Orr  
Department of Health, London

## AUTHORS' RESPONSE

In response to our article<sup>1</sup> Dr Scott-Orr correctly raises concerns about the possible health hazards of fuel octane enhancers such as benzene or other aromatic hydrocarbons which have been used as an alternative to tetra ethyl lead since the early 1980s. In doing so he echoes the concerns which have been raised in Italy and in some other European countries that the carcinogenic effects of benzene in the environment may outweigh any gains achieved by reducing environmental lead contamination.

This is unlikely to be a problem in Australia. Unleaded petrol used in Australia has a specified Research Octane Number (RON) of 91, while in Europe the RON of unleaded petrol is 95. In Europe this higher octane rating is achieved in part by increasing the amount of aromatics, including benzene, in the fuel. The important point to make is that the transition to the use of unleaded fuel in Australia will not be accompanied by an increase in the amount of aromatic compounds added to the fuel mix.

If on health grounds current levels of benzene were found to be hazardous then these policies would need revision. However, the low levels of benzene found in ambient air in Australian cities suggests that benzene will not be a major problem here.

Policy at both Federal and State levels is to lower the amount of lead added to petrol by about 25 per cent in all States and to reduce RON from 97 to 96, with a view to further reduction in 12 months. If there continues to be a high demand for high octane fuel the introduction of octane enhancers will have to be considered. In the meantime, industry and government have initiated research into the:

- capacity of industry to reduce lead levels while maintaining satisfactory octane and environmental performance;
- capacity of the leaded fleet to operate satisfactorily on reduced octane fuel; and
- feasibility, costs and benefits of using alternative fuel octane enhancers such as Methyl Manganese Tricarbonyl (MMT) and Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether (MTBE).

1. Corbett S, Cowie C. A Clever Country – The Health Benefits of Removing Lead from Petrol. NSW Public Health Bulletin November 1993.

## MENTAL HEALTH DIRECTORY AND WALL CHART

In 1993 the Mental Health Branch published the first edition of the *Directory of Mental Health Services in NSW*. It was the first comprehensive listing of mental health services and facilities to be published and distributed by the NSW Health Department.

On the basis of the high level of responses, comments and alterations to entries which followed the launch and distribution of the directory, a second edition was printed almost immediately and distributed in January 1994. In addition to public mental health services, the second edition has a comprehensive listing of non-government and multicultural services which are relevant to mental health.

It was felt that professionals such as GPs, police and Department of Community Services officers would also benefit from having readily accessible information on the services available in their Area/District, rather than a directory for the whole State. Accordingly, we are printing wall charts for each Area/District in NSW which will be distributed free of charge to such groups and other interested groups/professionals for whom this information would be valuable.

The charts are easy to read and a convenient size for offices and waiting rooms. They should be available from this month.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Public health is a rapidly developing profession, with many workforce issues ranging from training to employment conditions being debated. To encourage this debate and communication on these issues, the editor of the *Bulletin* invites submission of short articles, letters and commentary. These will be included in this column under the title of Professional Development. Contributions from public health bodies and universities which run public health courses are welcomed.

## 1994 PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER PLACEMENTS

Public Health Officers have been assigned the following placements:

PHO	Feb 1994-July 1994	Aug 1994-Jan 1995
<b>Third Year Officers</b>		
Glen Close	Chronic Diseases*	Chronic Diseases*
Susan Furber	Eastern Sydney Area PHU (Part time)	Eastern Sydney Area PHU (Part time)
Cait Lonie	Injury*	Health Service Development and Planning Branch
Justine Waters	Health Outcomes*	Health Outcomes*
<b>Second Year Officers</b>		
Magnolia Cardona	Western Sector PHU	Western Sector/Orana and Far West PHUs
Jennifer Chipps	Environmental health*	Environmental health*
Leena Gupta	Health Service Evaluation*	Health Service Evaluation*
Bernie Towler	Orana and Far West PHU	AIDS Bureau
<b>First Year Officers</b>		
James Blogg	Health Service Development and Planning Branch	Health Service Development and Planning Branch
Suzanne Blogg	Health Promotion	Health Promotion
Hugh Burke	Broken Hill	Broken Hill
Tony Butler	Eastern Sydney Area PHU	Hunter PHU
Valerie Delpach	Infectious Diseases*	Maternal and Child Health*
Gerard Fitzsimmons	Western Sector PHU	Southern Sydney Area PHU
Veth Guevarra	Maternal and Child Health*	Infectious Diseases*
Stephen Hooppell	AIDS Bureau	Northern Sydney Area/ Central Coast Area PHUs
Jeannine Liddle	Northern Sydney Area/ Central Coast Area PHUs	Western Sector PHU

\* Epidemiology and Health Services Evaluation Branch

## SUPERVISORS' WORKSHOP

The first workshop for supervisors of Public Health Officers was held on February 15, 1994. Its overall objective was to discuss issues of supervision in the context of adult learning, culminating in a list of "best practice" points for supervisors. Associate Professor Jackie Lublin, Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning in the University of Sydney, was the workshop facilitator and 24 PHO supervisors attended. A full article on the workshop will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Bulletin*.