
Response from Dr Garth Alperstein, Central Sydney Area Health Service

Dr Bell makes two points:

* that lead-based paint as a source of lead exposure requires further attention
* that he believes, as does Dr Donovan, that alleviating social disadvantage may in the long term be more beneficial than action directed specifically at exposure to lead.

I do not believe anyone would disagree on either issue. Alleviating social disadvantage is a complex and difficult long-term issue and will positively affect more than just those problems associated with lead exposure. In the meantime, there are simple measures that can be implemented to reduce children's exposure to lead. How much effort, money and human resources are put into dealing with all health issues, including lead, are what governments and the community are constantly negotiating.

CENTRAL SYDNEY AREA PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT

Central Sydney Public Health Unit convenes quarterly meetings of the multidisciplinary Lead Advisory Committee. The committee has representation from the Central Sydney Public Health and Health Promotion Units, local Divisions of General Practice, the Lead Reference Centre, the Lead Advisory Service (NSW), the Department of Housing, and the paint industry, as well as the Central Sydney community paediatrician and a local council environmental health officer. The committee aims to reduce the effects of lead and the risks from lead within the Central Sydney Area by developing and coordinating responses to lead within the Area, and liaising and collaborating with organisations outside the health sector. The committee also functions as a forum for information sharing about lead issues generally. In July 1997, a subcommittee was established to look at research issues. The Lead Research Sub-Committee aims to advise the Lead Advisory Committee and others about needs for research about lead, and to formulate research questions about lead issues.

A public health officer placed in the Central Sydney Public Health Unit undertook a literature review to examine evidence of the effectiveness of behavioural interventions aimed at health professionals, families and others to address lead issues. The Central Sydney Area Public Health Unit developed a local protocol for the follow-up of notifications of people with elevated blood lead levels. This protocol was used to investigate cases of elevated blood lead levels in the Central Sydney Area before the NSW Health guideline for Environmental Health Officers became available. The protocol’s public health unit operational summary, the letter to general practitioners about adult notifications, and the notification action checklist were used as examples in the NSW Health Department guideline.

HUNTER AREA PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT

In the North Lake Macquarie area, the Hunter Area Public Health Unit has been undertaking programs and research on lead issues:

* analysis of blood lead levels of children in the suburbs of North Lake Macquarie, and relevant comparisons
* ongoing evaluation of children's blood lead levels after household remediation
* a knowledge, attitudes and practices survey of parents whose homes have been remediated.

The North Lake Macquarie Remediation Centre was established at the end of 1995 with funding of $300,000 from the NSW Government Environmental Trust, the NSW Health Department, Pasminco Metals—Subhilde and Lake Macquarie City Council. In 1996, the Centre started remediation of houses around the Pasminco Cockle Creek smelter, where children had high blood lead levels.

Continued on page 96 ▶
Lead in dust and soil from day-care centres

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank: Macquarie University for financial support for this study under the Macquarie University Research Grants Scheme; Ms Ginie Udy of the Uniting Church Children's Services Forum for access to the day-care centres; the coordinators of the centres for their assistance; Professor Barry Batt for access to the ICP-AES; and Graeme Wailer for the surface wipe digestion method.


EDITORIAL NOTE

Lead is a ubiquitous contaminant of the urban environment. Children are at greatest risk of exposure and harm from absorption of environmental lead by virtue of their behaviour, their metabolism and the sensitivity of the developing nervous system to the toxic effects of lead. Lead in paint and lead additives in fuel are two sources of lead exposure in urban areas. This study confirms that lead is readily detected in the home and play environment of many children in NSW. A recent study showed that average blood lead levels in NSW preschool children were 5 to 7 µg/dL, which is an improvement since 1992. Reductions in the proportion of cars using leaded fuel and in the use of petrol and diesel fuel have reduced exposure. A study in Sydney showed that traffic flow near a child’s home was a more important determinant of blood lead level than the traffic flow at the child’s home. This research demonstrates that the need for efforts to reduce exposure to environmental lead, such as those now being coordinated by the Lead Reference Centre.