

December 18, 1952

Mr. Manfred Bowditch
Director of Health and Safety
Lead Industries Association
420 Lexington Avenue
New York City 17

Dear Manfred:

In belated response to your letter of November 28, I shall attempt to restate my position on the matter of the incidence of lead poisoning in present day American industry. The statement I made was impromptu, and was stimulated by Chick Sander's prior statement, which I thought needed correction. We are a bit too self-satisfied with what we have done, for it is not that good. However, what I said was a considered judgment based on experience, and not an irresponsible remark. I said substantially the same thing, in milder vein, in the report of the Committee on Lead Poisoning of APHA in 1943 - Occupational Lead Exposure and Lead Poisoning, APHA Report, page 7. If you will look on pages 643 and 644 of Patty's "Industrial Hygiene and Toxicology," you will find a much more precise statement of the situation as I see it.

My statement at the Foundation meeting was much as you quoted it in your letter. It is my observation that there are many mild cases of lead poisoning in American industry at present. There are goodly numbers of cases that are not so mild, but there are but few that go on unnoticed to the development of prolonged or permanent disability. Wrist drop, for example, is infrequent, and encephalopathy, in the adult, is not quite, but almost, as rare as wrist drop. One sees the latter occasionally, the former most infrequently, in my experience.

We have an opportunity, via the route of analytical control measures, which provide contact with considerable numbers of plants, and with diagnostic and medico-legal activities which bring us in contact with cases, to see a fairly sizeable segment of the lead-using trades. From this I should say that cases of lead poisoning in the lead trades occur with considerable frequency. The statistics on the subject are grossly unreliable, so far as the country is concerned, and even in the areas in which compensation for lead poisoning is subject to record and to issuance of reports, the full facts concerning the incidence of the disease are obscure. What happens, I think, is that new and old industries are continually

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developing or making use of new or additional processes which employ metallic lead and lead compounds, thereby creating new situations involving exposure to lead in such numbers as to offset much of the improvement that has been shown in the industries that have long used lead and continue to do so, as well as those which, with good advice and guidance, do the job correctly from the start. At any rate there is no dearth of cases, and only a small proportion of lead-using industrial plants of my acquaintance so control their exposure and supervise their men as to eliminate cases.

Therefore, unless a new spirit enters into the effort to eliminate occupational lead poisoning through the application of presently available medical and technical means, we shall continue indefinitely in the present situation, for the use of numerous lead compounds in a wide variety of industrial processes is with us to stay. There has been improvement within the last twenty-four years, but it is very spotty in character. That is, the job is done so well in some industries as to eliminate the problem, largely, but the cross-sectional improvement has not been satisfactory in proportion to the advance of our knowledge, and especially in the older, well-established industries, scarcely a one of which has a really satisfactory approach to the problem, from either the medical or engineering viewpoint.

This, I think, conveys the idea. Perhaps it labors it. I cease and desist, therefore, and take this means of sending Holiday Greetings.

Sincerely yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M. D.

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