

October 17, 1974

John S. Chapman, M.D., Chief Editor
Archives of Environmental Health
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Dallas, Texas 75219

Dear Doctor Chapman:

I return the review with some slight modifications. Shortening of the text proved to be difficult, next to impossible, since one must, as briefly as possible, make apparent the nature of the situation. The fact is, in effect, that a controversy over this matter has been raging for many years, and I was responsible for it, to some extent, for demonstrating some years ago that lead is a normal constituent of human organisms on a lead-bearing earth. Even native Mexican Indians, living in a primitive part of the earth, ingest lead with everything they eat and drink, and eliminate lead in their excreta regularly. It has never been possible to describe, in simple, definitive terms, the difference between lead as a normal constituent of the human body, and lead as a poison, except in certain quantitative terms. And so, in response to your request, I am put to the necessity of outlining the hazard, in its practical terms of medical performance, rather than in defining the precise status of lead as a poison. This is, unfortunately, the problem of modern medicine in relation to poisons, and it has to be met in terms of methods of medical procedure rather than in any simple definition.

I'm sorry that I am put to the necessity of convincing you that such is the case, but this is the result of the facts of life. The authors of this book have not learned this lesson, through their own experience. I was compelled to do so years ago, through my medical responsibility for men engaged in industry, (at first) in a very dangerous and unusual industry in which tetraethyl lead had to be handled safely, and then in the larger field of industry in the larger and wider handling of inorganic lead compounds. And so I wind up in prescribing a medical means of dealing with the problem of lead poisoning in early childhood, rather than in stating a definition of lead as a poison. The problem is one, not of a substance, but of a specific quantity of a substance which is world-wide in its occurrence, and is found in all living organisms on this planet, so far as present evidence indicates.

Sincerely yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M.D.
Professor Emeritus of
Occupational Medicine

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