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Environmental Health Department

June 30, 1972

Letters to the Editor
Washington Post
1515 L Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Sirs:

Your editorial of June 28 entitled "Lead Poisoning in the Streets" has come to our attention. It is noteworthy that the very day your editorial appeared a three-day conference on childhood lead poisoning was beginning in Washington. Throughout the conference, it was clearly, explicitly and unequivocally made clear by all the speakers from cities and agencies concerned with this problem that childhood lead poisoning is directly connected with leaded paints. These paints were formerly used in housing interiors and are now chipping and flaking in substandard housing. The possibility of a causal role in childhood lead poisoning of lead fall-out from the air was raised during a press conference connected with the meeting and was dismissed.

Numerous studies have shown conclusively that childhood lead poisoning has one cause - old lead paint which is now chipping and flaking from old dilapidated housing. A well-known study in Cleveland compared the prevalence of lead poisoning in a poor area in Cleveland. It was found that 4.7% of children living in old housing showed signs of lead poisoning whereas no children in a new housing project were afflicted. Dr. J. J. Chisolm of Baltimore has described the triad which causes pediatric lead poisoning, namely: dilapidated housing with old lead paint on the walls, a child with pica, and parents with inadequate resources to cope with the family's needs. Dr. Rene Dubos, the noted environmentalist has said: "The problem is so well defined, so neatly packaged, with both causes and cures known, that if we don't eliminate this social crime, our society deserves all the disasters that have been forecast for it."

In its highest concentration in atmospheric fallout, the lead content in dust is 0.3 - 0.4% while the old lead paint may contain up to 50% lead. In view of this fact and the statements of eminently qualified experts in the field of pediatric lead poisoning, it seems that the real cause of pediatric lead poisoning should not be in doubt. Yet, the EPA and certain politicians in their zeal to condemn lead in gasoline have fabricated a theory linking lead usage in gasoline with pediatric lead poisoning.

Contrary to the statement in your editorial there is not a shred of evidence to support their fanciful theory and the very lack of such evidence represents a strong argument against its validity. Pediatric lead poisoning is among the most intensively studied toxicological phenomena. Were lead from gasoline a factor in pediatric lead poisoning surely some hard evidence would have turned up by this time.

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The real danger is that the public will be confused by this nonsense and delay the solving of the real problem - eating old lead paint. Your editorial questions whether or not children's lives are as important to the nation as bearing the extra costs. Certainly the answer is emphatically yes. Yet the present Administration has appropriated only a small portion of the funds allocated by Congress to fight the acknowledged real problem. Funds are needed to combat the inner city decay which has spawned this and other problems related to inadequate housing. Wasting hundreds of millions of dollars and billions of barrels of precious crude oil together with introducing potentially hazardous substances into the air - the consequences of banning lead in gasoline - will do nothing to prevent pediatric lead poisoning and further will cause disenchantment among the public who is being asked to bear these costs. Recently, Mr. Robert Novick, of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the man who has the responsibility for the federal government's pediatric lead poisoning prevention programs, characterized such theories as described in your editorial as "diversions" and cautioned against our getting lost by "chasing paper tigers." We would do well to heed his advice.

Sincerely,

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Director, Environmental Health

JFC:lg

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