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LEAD POISONING IN SLUM CHILDREN

Lead poisoning in children is caused by the eating of peeling lead-containing paint and plaster in run-down housing. If infections are excluded, it is the most common childhood disease in the City of New York. Its causes and results are known; it can be treated and prevented. Yet, because of a lack of public awareness and action, a "silent epidemic" exists, and each year thousands of children are needlessly exposed to severe illness.

In Chicago, Cleveland and Baltimore, from 5-10% of children aged one to six living in poor housing have lead poisoning. New York City has 800,000 run-down housing units; using population figures, we get the conservative estimate that 9,000-18,000 children in New York presently have lead poisoning. (Health Department officials have estimated 25,000-35,000.) Yet only 600 cases are reported each year. The reason is that the early signs are like the flu or other minor diseases: loss of appetite, stomach pain, constipation and crankiness. If the child is not given the correct lab test early by the doctor, or if the parents don't ask for a lab test when they see their child eating paint chips, the child may become sicker, vomit and develop convulsions. Then he may go into a coma. Some children with coma die. Very often they have serious brain damage which will last the rest of their lives.

The main cause of lead poisoning is old layers of paint falling from walls and ceilings. Many doctors say that 90-95% of cases in children can be traced to eating lead-containing paint or plaster. Until 20 years ago most paint contained lead. Therefore any old building very likely has lead in the bottom paint layers. Many young children pick up non-food particles and eat them. In newer housing, plaster is kept in good repair and there is almost no lead poisoning. But in poor housing about one young child in thirteen will become poisoned, with the chance of permanent brain damage, or death.

Prepared by Glenn L. Paulson and Joel Buxbaum, 14 February 1969.

For further information, call or write the SCPI office.

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