

February 28, 1935

Doctor Karl M. Bowman,
Boston Psychopathic Hospital,
74 Fenwood Road,
Boston, Mass.

Dear Doctor Bowman: -

I appreciate your courtesy in sending me the material which you are to publish. I have made a few unimportant changes in what I wrote you, either for the sake of brevity or increased accuracy, and I return the manuscript herewith. I have taken the liberty of making a slight correction of Doctor Aub's discussion, in that, having quoted me, he has produced not quite the impression that my article on the subject justifies, quite without any misapprehension of the facts on his part, I dare say. The somewhat greater liberty I have taken in making some suggestions with regard to Doctor Hamilton's discussion can hardly be expected to go without comment and without discussion with her. I am writing to her, therefore, in order to more fittingly make the suggestions for the changes which I have indicated. Her facts are a little wrong in a few instances and her interpretation of the relationship of this case to the public health problem of leaded gasoline is in error, and perhaps my detailed knowledge of the history and the development of this whole matter entitle me to make suggestions, which in relation to most subjects would be presumptuous.

It seems only proper that I should point out to you the nature and the reasons for my criticisms of her discussion. I shall take them in the order of their appearance in the article. (1) The poisonings referred to in the "Standard Oil Works" were not concerned with the blending of lead with gasoline, and it is not proper to enter into this error for the reason that there has never been a case of poisoning in connection with these mixing operations. I know this is true for I have the records (and also the clinical responsibility) for all the persons who have ever carried out this work. The cases in question originated in an experimental manufacturing plant for tetraethyl lead, in which a new process was being developed. (Perhaps it is vanity on my part, but I wish to say that neither I nor my associates had any part in the hygienic problem at this plant.)

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(2) The "evidence of lead absorption" --- consisted of a difference in the fecal lead excretion of a test group of garage mechanics - a difference so slight as to have a doubtful significance at that time (1925) and one which, at present, in view of what we know about lead ingestion with food, and its variability, and particularly in view of the subsequent investigations which show a wide variability among groups of workmen with respect to fecal lead excretion, must be interpreted as chance variation.

(3) The British Commission did not accept the findings of the American Public Health Service, nor did they accept our more recent and more detailed studies, but they critically examined them and checked the findings at several crucial points, arriving at their own conclusions after satisfying themselves that the facts were correct.

(4) The further investigation of this problem has not been confined to the examination of cases of reported injury, but it has gone on with an increasingly elaborate scale, and by means of continuously improving methods. Every phase of the industry has been under searching investigation.

(5) This sentence gives the misleading impression in print, - not intended by Doctor Hamilton I believe, - that the case of Mr. Whitney is definitely and immediately related to the hazards associated with the general problem of leaded gasoline, and that the whole question is reopened by it, whereas the problems of the filling station attendant, and the garage mechanic, and the public in general, have little relation to it. No one can disagree with Doctor Hamilton that there is need for vigilance, but it would be unfortunate if the impression were produced by a "therefore" that the careful work which has been done on this question has been all for naught.

Perhaps you will think I am somewhat academic in my point of view on this discussion, and perhaps I am. On the other hand, it may be a virtue - though like many others, somewhat unpleasant at times - to feel a curiously personal reaction against the introduction of inaccuracies into the written record of a field or an issue with which one is intimately acquainted. At any rate, my one apology is for the volume of this letter.

Cordially yours,

Robert A. Kehoe

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