

DISCUSSION GROUP

on the

REDUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL EXPOSURE TO LEAD POISONING

Meeting of 26 May 1969

The Rockefeller University

The following individuals have indicated their intention to attend:

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0007-SWP-000005827

Conference on Lead Poisoning in Children
Rockefeller University May 20-22, 1969

Synopsis of Medical Aspects of Childhood Lead Poisoning
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Childhood lead poisoning is a preventable disease. An effective program of prevention requires two essential ingredients: A clear recognition of the etiologic factors and a clear commitment of responsibility by physician, public health worker, city official and aroused public to take concerted and effective action.

The etiologic pattern which can ultimately lead to irreversible lead encephalopathy consists of a triad: The child, the parent and the place. The child is a toddler with exaggerated oral activities. The parent is a mother with inadequate resources (as they emotional, intellectual, informational and/or economic) to cope with her family's needs. The place is a neglected slum housing unit with flaking lead pigment paint within reach of a small child's grasp. The dynamic interaction of these factors will be discussed, with the main emphasis on the environmental factors. In the young child, symptomatic acute lead intoxication is primarily a summertime disease: In the United States, approximately 80 to 85% of all cases occur between May and October. The disease is almost exclusively limited to pre-school children who live in houses built prior to 1940, many of which are still in use and still contain layers of lead pigment paint which have never been removed. The principle sources of lead within such houses are the painted windowsills and door frames. Recent surveys in Baltimore indicate that 50 to 70% of old houses in selected slum areas still contain dangerous quantities of flaking lead paint. A few small chips of such paint may contain 100 mgm or more of lead. (The safe daily intake of lead is less than 0.5 mgm.) The repetitive ingestion of a few small chips of such paint, if permitted to continue for more than three months, can lead to the absorption of a potentially lethal body burden of lead.

Clinical manifestations tend to vary with both the age of the child and the magnitude of abnormal lead ingestion. Acute encephalopathy is more common in children 15 to 30 months of age, while intoxication without encephalopathy in this age range usually presents as some form of hyperirritable or aggressive behavior disturbance. Associated iron deficiency anemia is virtually always present. The onset of acute encephalopathy tends to

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Currently, there is wide-spread interest in the application of new screening techniques to the prevention of childhood plumbism. Three techniques which are comparable in cost are currently available and under investigation. These include the determination of δ -aminolevulinic acid in urine. The major problem in the application of this test is the difficulty in obtaining random urine samples promptly from young children 12 to 24 months of age, who are the patients at greatest risk. Currently, the suitability of the determination of lead in hair is under intensive investigation. The technique recommends itself because of the ease of obtaining adequate samples of hair. Determination of lead in blood is the most reliable. A venous blood sample is required. More sensitive methods for the determination of lead in blood, preferably upon capillary samples of blood, would greatly facilitate this problem. Not only children, but also houses must be screened. Simple techniques are available for this purpose. The cost of such procedures is small when compared with the cost of a single case of lead encephalopathy, which at the least will entail hospitalization for four to six weeks, not to mention the cost of long-range follow-up care, special educational facilities and, in the unfortunate few, permanent institutionalization.

How much more intelligent it would be to spend our effort and substance on the systematic elimination of environmental lead exposure associated with old dwellings. Were this to be done, childhood lead poisoning could be largely eradicated in the United States, as it apparently has been in Australia. For example, immediately following the birth of an infant of a family residing in a pre-World War II dwelling, the prospective dwelling could be inspected and sampled for lead, so that hazardous conditions could be corrected before the infant reaches the age of pica.