

April 25, 1969

Dr. V. P. Gupta
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Dear Doctor Gupta:

I am more than a little surprised by the questions in your letter and while I can answer the first of them without difficulty, I am afraid I cannot give any references to the literature without spending time which is in short supply at this time; neither can I give you the names of any countries or government agencies which are concerned in any manner with the substance of your questions. I'll explain why this is the case in answering your first question.

There is no basis, whatsoever, for the belief that milk has any useful place in the prevention of lead poisoning or in the amelioration of the symptomatology of the disease.

There is, of course, a generally beneficial effect of the use of milk in the diet of persons who are suffering from general malnutrition; if one were dealing with semi-starvation and malnutrition in the population of an industrial plant, the introduction of milk would certainly be beneficial.

An old tradition, very like an "old wife's tale" has it that milk is good to prevent lead poisoning. This idea was supported, to some extent by a medical hypothesis, some years ago, to the effect that a high calcium diet aided in the deposition of lead in the skeleton, thereby getting it out of the circulation and the soft tissues and so shielding the latter against toxic effects. With the present recognition of the fallacy of this hypothesis, there is no longer any theoretical reason in support of the myth, and certainly there has been no evidence, published or otherwise, in support of the idea. I cannot take the time to search through the literature for obscure references to one or another aspect of this matter, for there is no such evidence but only, here and there, statements of opinion and practice. This is certainly not the proper way to protect men against occupational exposure to lead.

I heard something recently about this practice of administering milk in certain countries or provinces, but I really know nothing about it at first hand. It was spoken of at the time as an example of ignorance. I can only suggest that this could be supported governmentally or within an industry by people who lack, entirely, any familiarity with the modern field of industrial hygiene and who hark back to ancient practices merely because they are ancient. The matter is not worth your while to consider, unless it should be that you are trying to discredit the idea which is being substituted for appropriate preventive measures. No evidence has ever been submitted of any beneficial effects, so far as I have been able to discover.

Sincerely yours,

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

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