

January 23, 1962

Dr. Gordon C. Smith
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School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine
The University
Sydney, N.S.W.

Dear Doctor Smith:

I am pleased to give you a brief account of the occurrence of the two cases of lead poisoning referred to in your letter of January 15th. At the same time I shall correct one or two points in the story which might well have caused some doubt as to the validity of the report.

The two persons, a husband and wife, newly married, one (the man) a sophomore student in this medical school, and the other of about the same age who is a technical assistant in the Department of Internal Medicine, became ill at about the same time, just about a month after their return from a honeymoon trip during the summer vacation. They returned to a small apartment on about July 1st, did the necessary things to set themselves up in housekeeping, lived quietly to themselves, eating all of their meals in the apartment. Both became ill and both (being in the medical family here) were admitted to the hospital and cared for by staff people in Internal Medicine.

I was called in when their illness, obviously suggestive of plumbism, but without the slightest reason for crediting them with any exposure to lead, required the identification, by specific means, if possible, of the nature of their intoxication.

Analytical data (urine and blood) demonstrated the significance of their absorption of lead, and then the mysterious source had to be found. This was found by a thorough investigation of the contents of their apartment while they were still in hospital, having left everything as it was. To make a long story short, we found their new (and only) set of table ware to be an "art" pottery, very handsome and appealing to a young, aesthetic woman, but quite unsatisfactory for regular use (or in fact for any kind of service in connection with food.) A more or less conventional series of tests of the extractability of the glaze demonstrated that its lead had not been converted to silicate (low temperature in firing) but was readily dissolved in dilute (5%) acetic acid. The tableware was quite capable of providing for each of those persons quantities of lead ranging from around 5 mg. to as much as 15 mg. per day. Their total period of exposure was about 30 days, and the absorption had led in each instance to concentrations of lead in excess of 0.08 mg. per 100 grams of whole blood.

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The sequel of this was an investigation of the source of this pottery, which was readily found, and its removal from a fairly wide market in some of the best department stores in this country. This plunged the maker into bankruptcy. The effect of the incident, which unfortunately was publicised despite my efforts to handle the situation quietly, has led us into one useful outcome - namely the investigation of the principal brands of tableware, and an effort on the part of the American Pottery Association to set and maintain specifications based on standard procedures of testing.

There have been certain other consequences of this incident which are of some interest, and I expect to get the important aspects of it into publication when time permits. This, however, will acquaint you with the principal points.

I am pleased to hear from you again and to have this opportunity of expressing my kindest regards.

Sincerely yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M. D.

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