

June 7, 1937

Dr. F. L. Hoffman
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of the Franklin Institute
133 South 36th Street
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Doctor Hoffman:

I have no doubt you will think me very negligent in having delayed so long in answering your two letters. I have pondered over your suggestions and those of other members of the Committee, and I have not come to any very definite conclusions as to what can best be done to serve the purposes of the American Public Health Association. I do not believe a committee of this sort is likely to accomplish much in a conference, or in a general discussion of the problem. The other persons on the Committee, like ourselves, are busy with their own work, and are more interested in their own way of approach to the problem than in any joint or concentrated attack upon it. What I have considered doing is to ask each member of the Committee to clarify his own field of work, to accumulate as much information as possible, and to think in terms of some pooling of our information in the form of a report at a considerably later date. Accumulation of data in experimental work just as the accumulation of statistical data requires a long period of time. It is always the crystallization of a certain point of view, at least as to a method of approach. I am inclined to feel that perhaps the best that we could do would be to think in these terms and to meet together in conference at the time of the New York meeting so as to lay out some sort of cooperative program for the following year. At present I have all the work I can do. We have an experimental program under way which, in my opinion, is directed at some of the most fundamental experimental problems. We are not nearly so much in need of funds as we are of time, and we have an adequate field of experimentation. I have no difficulty finding my way into plants with variable amounts of lead exposure, and I believe we now have the background of experience which makes it possible to capitalize on the opportunities presented to us. Thus what I had to say in my initial letter to you was not any plea for opportunities for experimental work. Rather

what I meant to say was that until the facts as to the behavior of lead are well known, there is really very little more to say in the form of reports than has already been said. It is my feeling that if we do say anything, it should be directed at the formulation of a program which, over a period of years, would serve to clarify some of the most needed information, and to put it into use in a practical way. You say in your first letter that it would be important to determine the correctness of my statement that "the incidence of lead poisoning in industry is unnecessarily high". I take it that you mean by that that it is important to make this clear to workers in industrial hazards. That my statement is true and requires no proof to people who are familiar with plant activities, and who at the same time are familiar with safety measures, is without question. I made the statement not as a matter of discussion, but as a true matter of fact on the basis of my own personal observations. If anyone doubts it, I can take him to lead plants in which the lead exposure is so great that a layman can see it, and in which cases of lead poisoning range all the way from the mildest type to fatal encephalopathy. There may not be many of such plants left but there are some which I have visited and about which I have personal knowledge. In fact, there are a number of states in the United States in which the conditions, so far as lead exposure is concerned, are very little better than they were a century ago. In these states, statistical studies, that is to say, studies of the vital statistics, would be a complete waste of anyone's time. There are a few statistics and those that are available are wholly inadequate and inaccurate. In such instances one has to collect his own statistical data before he can begin to analyse it. These places are the very ones which a public health organization would wish to reach. Yet they are the ones which none of our current methods do reach. Preventive measures have improved, generally speaking, as the result of the pressure either of public opinion, legislation or of education. I put education in the last place advisedly for I think it is the least effective of the three types of pressure. I think it is fairly generally true that industry knows better than it does. It learns that something can be done and then is subsequently kicked into doing it when it can no longer get away with its older methods. I abhor legislation as a means of accomplishing hygienic ends, and at the same time it is my feeling that we shall probably never be able to make any general application of the available information on the significance of lead exposure until some of the existing legislation has been cleared away and replaced by clean-cut definitions of hazardous exposure. Before such legislation is feasible, the issue will have to be clearly defined in scientific terms.

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I think you will see rather clearly from this that I have no very definite program in mind for the work of our Committee. Therefore I shall ask the various members to go over the whole problem, to clarify their own ideas on it, and to take part in a general discussion at the time of the New York meeting.

I should be pleased to have any suggestions or any comments which you may choose to make on what I have said above.

Cordially yours,

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Robert A. Kehoe, M.D.

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