

March 28, 1967

Mr. Hugh Cook
Director, Technical Division
Wine Institute
717 Market Street
San Francisco, California 94103

Dear Mr. Cook:

I am sending to you, under separate cover certain reprints of published articles which, I believe, will give you some idea of the background of information that has led me to suggest that the wine-making industry in this country should give serious consideration to the abandonment of lead foil as a capsule for wine bottles.

I have little doubt that you and your members are fairly familiar with the history of the use of lead compounds in relation to wine, and with certain very unpleasant episodes of lead poisoning within the industry in the past. If you are not you should be. These episodes have little relationship to the present issue except for their historical association with lead, but the latter is enough, especially in these "touchy" times, to merit some concern. This is true in particular, because of the involvement of other alcoholic beverages in some real difficulties. "Moonshine" whiskey, for example, has been notorious for its serious contamination with lead, while certain brands of beer on the market, even recently, have been found to have been appreciably contaminated. I would not suggest any relationship of wine to these situations, except that it is another beverage, and having visited certain wineries on the West Coast, I have some idea of the care that is being taken for the proper handling of wines in America. I do not suppose for a moment that this is universal practice, but it seems very good.

These and other circumstances which have heightened the concern of governmental agencies and many other people, with respect to lead in their environment, especially in the past year, and that is why I was stimulated to raise this question at this time, instead of years ago.

One other point is of some importance. For quite a few years before the organic phosphate insecticides were developed and put into use, many of the grapes in the U.S.A. had been sprayed with lead arsenate, and carried an appreciable burden at the time of harvesting. The unfermented grape juice of that period was often contaminated with lead, sometimes with considerable quantities of both lead and arsenic. Fortunately, for the wine industry, in areas where the wine would have been affected in this manner, the lead separated out in the dregs with the tartrates and did not appear appreciably in the wine, but this was not understood by everyone, and there was some concern.

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For all of these reasons, factually significant and insignificant, it is simply unwise for your industry to permit the introduction of any lead into its product, if it can be avoided. Some lead is utterly inevitable, since everything that springs from the earth contains traces of lead naturally. Any quantity which you add, by any means, is redundant and unnecessary, and in fact is illegal.

I do not know the whole story of the use of lead for this purpose, so that I am not prepared to say that there is no good reason for its use. I have little doubt, however, that a satisfactory means can be developed for eliminating this use, and I should certainly think that it should be done as a matter of ordinary prudence.

Very truly yours,

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

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P.S. You will find few references to wine in the material which I am sending to you, and it would be difficult, at this time, to gather up additional material from our files. One item, however, is found on Page 4, of the Harben Lectures.

You may not be interested in all of these articles, but I believe you will recognize the general significance of my recommendation to you.

RAK