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HEADLINE: OLD PAINT, NOT GASOLINE, IS THE PROBLEM IN LEAD POISONING

BODY:

To the Editor:

Your Aug. 10 editorial "The Hard Politics of Lead" presents a distorted and incomplete view of the scientific information pertaining to the contribution of lead usage in gasoline to lead intake in children. Noted health scientists who specialize in lead studies, such as Dr. J. Julian Chisolm of the John F. Kennedy Institute in Baltimore and Dr. Paul B. Hammond of the University of Cincinnati, have relied on their decades of study of environmental lead to reach two basic conclusions:

* The real problem with lead is old lead paint, which poor children eat either in the form of paint dust or chips.

* Easing the present lead-in-gasoline regulations would make no measurable difference in the blood lead of children and, of course, would make no difference in the number of cases of pediatric lead poisoning.

The Times once again relies on the study by Needleman to suggest that low-level lead exposure may cause I.Q. deficits in children. While Needleman's findings and views have been cited innumerable times in the popular press, the scientific press is replete with criticisms of his study.

Dr. Claire Ernhart of Case-Western Reserve University, among others, has vigorously criticized Needleman's work for its failure to properly take into account other more likely causes of the I.Q. deficits in his study group. Dr. Ernhart's own study of New York City children, which did take these factors into account, could not find a lead effect. Despite the controversy surrounding his study, Needleman refuses to make his detailed data available to other scientists for analysis.

The studies attempting to correlate blood lead with lead usage in gasoline on a seasonal basis are similarly flawed. Yes, the use of lead in gasoline goes up in the summer and, yes, lead in blood goes up in the summer. But they are not related. The first report of an increase in blood lead in the summer, which is an apparently normal physiologic effect, appeared in 1922, a year before lead was first introduced into gasoline.

Lead in gasoline has proven to be a convenient whipping-boy for both the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Centers for Disease Control. These agencies were mandated by Congress to solve the admittedly very difficult old-lead-paint problem in dilapidated housing. The resources that these agencies have spent, through the development of spurious correlations such as the seasonal trends, to blame lead in gasoline as the cause of elevated blood

N 16050

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leads would have been far better expended in fulfilling their mandate.

The real shame is that such studies are accepted uncritically by The Times and others while the other side of the story remains untold in the popular media. Because of this, the public may have to lose the millions of barrels of crude oil that lead in gasoline saves while adding billions of dollars to the U.S. balance of payments deficit with the OPEC countries.

Yet the lead poisoning problem in this country won't be helped a bit.
JEROME F. COLE, New York, Aug. 10, 1982

The writer is executive vice president of the International Lead Zinc Research Organization, Inc.

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