

Lead Poisoning Seen Brain Damage Cause

By JOE CLARK

A University of Pennsylvania biochemist believes an "enormous number" of children in ghetto areas in the city with mental and learning problems suffer brain damage caused by lead poisoning.

Dr. Irving Shapiro, an assistant professor at Penn, says a 6-month study he has just completed shows children who live in the inner city have five times as much lead in their teeth as youngsters in the suburbs.

The examination of the teeth, he said, was a tool in determining the amount of lead, which, in the ghetto, most frequently comes from eating peeling paint and cracked putty.

Certain amounts of lead are also breathed in through polluted air, he adds.

ACCORDING TO Dr. Marvin Aaronson, city medical examiner, there were no deaths linked to lead poisoning in the city last year.

"However," he added, "there were 72 incomplete cases; most of which show some form of chemical involvement."

Dr. Shapiro's research is being done with baby teeth of children from parts of Philadelphia, Montgomery, and Delaware counties, and Burlington, N. J. So far he has received 500 teeth, but he says, "We want as many as we can get. The more teeth we have, the better we can keep up with what's going into our children."

He has received the teeth from various community groups, dental clinics, hospitals and dentists. The study involves teeth from youngsters ages 6 through 11.

"There was a marked difference between the two groups (those in the ghetto and those in the suburbs)," Dr. Shapiro said in an interview with the Daily News.

THE AMOUNTS of lead found in some inner city children, he said, were "extremely high," adding: "We can say this finding fits in with other evidence that there are a lot more cases of subtle lead poisoning in the inner city than doctors ever find."

After the lead gets into the system, Dr. Shapiro says, "it



Photo by Joseph McGuinn

Dr. Irving Shapiro: "... a lot of effect."

stunts mental growth."

"It doesn't have much effect on physical growth, but has a lot of effect on behavioral growth. Children with lead poisoning tend to be very backward."

Dr. Shapiro said the program was mainly "interested in finding out about children who don't show any overt symptoms of lead poisoning; those who take small amounts of lead into the body from a young age, and the lead wouldn't show up in the blood."

The doctor said he was certain there were slow-learning, backward children in Philadelphia, but no one knows "the background of what causes the problem. There's no real explanation. Some call it a silent epidemic," he said.