

CHRONIC LEAD POISONING IN INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

Chronic lead poisoning occurs much more frequently among infants and young children than has been generally supposed. It would be a more prominent item in both morbidity and mortality records but for the fact that the condition is often unrecognized by physicians. This conclusion was based upon an inquiry recently made by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company among a number of prominent pediatricists. Large numbers of such cases among children were disclosed in the practice of these doctors.

The most informing reply to the Company's letters was that of a physician who stated that fifty cases of lead poisoning in children had been seen in a single Boston hospital during the last six years, that diagnosis in these cases was "proven beyond a doubt" and that the lead had been ingested, for the most part, as the result of chewing paint from the woodwork or toys. Several pediatricists reported that they had demonstrated conclusively that lead pigments in shields and lead ointments on the breasts of mothers, who were suckling young infants, were responsible for lead poisoning which had now and then proved fatal. A majority of the pediatricists stated that chronic lead poisoning in infancy and childhood is by no means a rare condition, and almost all believed that wide publicity should be given to this fact through the press or the "popular" literature of health departments and private health agencies, with special insistence upon the dangers present in cribs and toys painted with material which contains lead.

One correspondent stated that he had made it a practice over a period of twenty-five years to warn parents about the danger of children developing a paint-eating habit, and another doctor wrote that he found intelligent parents fearful of wet paint but oblivious to the dangers of dry paint.

Lead poison is a real source of danger to infants and young children, and education of parents concerning this hazard would be a definite, forward step in public health education. Lead poisoning is rarely thought of as a cause of illness in infants and children. Private physicians having a general practice should consider more frequently the possibility that they may be dealing with this serious disease.

Metropolitan Life Insurance Company
Statistical Bulletin, October, 1930.