

November 28, 1947

Miss Veronica L. Conley,
Committee on Cosmetics,
Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the
American Medical Association,
535 North Dearborn Street,
Chicago 10, Illinois.

Dear Miss Conley:

I am glad to reply as well as I can to your letter of November 4.

The problem of percutaneous absorption of lead salts is, in my opinion, a completely insignificant one. From time to time, certain men have believed they have found evidence of the absorption of lead into the hair and therefrom into the subcutaneous tissues and into the circulation. The evidence for this is most unconvincing, however, and in my opinion one need have no concern as to systemic lead absorption by this mechanism. The real problem lies elsewhere. The contamination of the scalp and of the hair with lead compounds results in the contamination of fingers, and this inevitably leads to the contamination of articles introduced into the mouth. Generally speaking, this is not a very serious matter, and if individuals were instructed so that they would use ordinary cleanliness, no problem would present itself. The infrequency of the use of the hair dye might very well serve to counteract any real risk in this regard, and certainly if the hair and scalp is washed properly after the application of such a dye, the problem becomes insignificant. On the other hand, I look with complete disfavor upon the application of a material containing 3% of lead salts two or three times a week. The quantities of lead involved here could easily be a significant source of lead swallowed with food or taken into the mouth with other materials. Generally speaking, I think the risk would be rather small, since we are dealing here with adults. The general habits of such individuals would tend to prevent any very considerable absorption of lead from this source. Nevertheless the potential risk is there. It is, therefore, a question as to whether the risk should be prevented utterly through more or less universal condemnation of such products, or whether the consumer should be advised of the nature of the hazard so as to be able to protect himself therefrom. In any case, I feel no hesitation in stating that you need not fear the results of absorption of such material through the scalp.

Sincerely yours,

Robert A. Kehoe, M. D.