

Paint-Gasoline Peril

Get Lead Out of Our Cities

By Jeff Stansbury and Edward Flatau

WASHINGTON — Our government is under fire for failing to deal forcefully with the lead poisoning that plagues thousands of children in the inner cities. Two major



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sources of this poisoning are leaded paint and lead emissions that pour from automobiles—most densely in the inner city during rush hours.

Protests from environmental scientists, congressmen and urban action groups have greeted an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposal to phase out lead in gasoline completely by 1984. These critics cite a National Academy of Science study which declares that all lead can be removed from gasoline by 1977 at a cost of less than 2 cents per gallon to the consumer.

In a letter to EPA Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus last month, 40 members of Congress contended that his proposal to reduce gasoline lead gradually would not avert serious health problems.

THE LAWMAKERS were particularly concerned about the lead which accumulates in the dust and dirt on city streets as a result of automobile exhausts. Even if the lead level in the dust matched the two-thirds decrease that the EPA has recommended for the lead content in gasoline by 1977, the lawmakers said, approximately 100 parts per million lead would still choke the most cities' cell.

"A child would need to ingest only one-tenth of a teaspoonful of dirt daily—the equivalent of sucking his dirty thumb—to exceed the maximum daily permissible dose for lead, the dose above which actual poisoning could occur," they declared.

Industry charges that "there is not a shred of evidence" to link gasoline lead with the poisoning of children. Only leaded paint has been shown to be a major source of lead poisoning, they say.

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Yet, Dr. Bonnie J. Peacock, director of a child health clinic in the District of Columbia, responds that since he started using screening of inner-city children, "it is becoming evident that many of them with elevated blood lead levels have no history of eating paint and plaster." In Chicago, where the density of automobiles is far lower than in Washington, D. C., the percentage of ghetto children with dangerously high blood levels is markedly lower than in the nation's capital.

NO ONE DISPUTES that excessive lead in the bloodstream is an extremely dangerous condition. But Dr. Albert J. Fritsch of the Center for Science in the Public Interest challenges the lead industry's argument that lead in gasoline should not be banned because no one has proved lead in the air and street dust is harmful. He notes that a ghetto child with a background of lead ingestion from paint has been shown to be jeopardized by even the slightest intake of further lead, whatever the source.

"This fact is more than sufficient to shift the burden of proof back to the automobile and lead industries," Dr. Fritsch says.

Cole also argues that removing lead from gasoline will encourage the release of other harmful substances, namely polynuclear aromatics, into the air. Rockefeller himself claimed that EPA did not ban gasoline lead outright because of fear of an increased use of aromatics to boost octane. Yet Fritsch contends that industry can remove half the aromatics at a cost of only one-tenth of a cent per gallon, while the other half—produced by lead deposits in cars—will disappear as leaded gasoline becomes obsolete.

ON THE POSITIVE SIDE, the Food and Drug Administration recently ordered that by Jan. 1, 1974, lead be banned from all household paints. Shortly thereafter, however, thousands of people were left in jeopardy when the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) suspended its policy requiring the removing of all toxic lead-based paint in HUD-owned buildings. HUD justified the action on the ground that a more effective way to remove the paint was "under study."

The game is literally being studied to death.

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