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THE LEAD REFERENCE CENTRE

Richard Birdsey
Lead Reference Centre

The need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the Statewide management of lead hazards in the environment was identified in 1992 and led to the release of the NSW Government Lead Issues Paper by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) in 1993. The NSW Interdepartmental Lead Taskforce was established in June 1993 and chaired by the EPA throughout 1993 and 1994.

In June 1993 the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) announced a new public health goal for all Australians to have a blood lead level lower than 0.48 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ (10 $\mu\text{g/dL}$) and a reduction schedule for blood lead levels by 1998.

The previous NSW Government endorsed the recommendations of the NSW Interdepartmental Lead Taskforce and its working groups and the NSW Lead Management Action Plan (LMAP) in November 1994. Just before the release of the LMAP, the NSW Parliament established a Parliamentary Select Committee Upon Lead Pollution to investigate lead issues in NSW. This committee met in the second half of 1994 and released its report in December 1994. The previous Government had not considered the Parliamentary Select Committee report before the change of government occurred. The committee report, which was tabled in the NSW Parliament on May 25, 1995, raises major issues that the committee considers were not adequately addressed in the LMAP. One of the significant differences between the Select Committee report and the LMAP is the policy response to lead paint hazards.

One goal of the LMAP was to determine the extent of childhood lead exposure in NSW. A system of mandatory notification of excessive blood lead levels has been established to work towards achieving this goal. Since December 1996 pathology laboratories in NSW have been required by law to notify the appropriate Public Health Unit when a blood level exceeds 15 $\mu\text{g/dL}$ (0.72 $\mu\text{mol/L}$). The notification system will assist health care professionals, particularly general practitioners, to care for, and manage, people with elevated blood lead levels. PHU staff may be able to assist GPs and patients in identifying sources of lead exposure and provide professional remediation advice.

Both the LMAP and the Parliamentary Select Committee report strongly supported the establishment of the Lead Reference Centre, to be administered by the EPA. Establishing of the Lead Reference Centre was publicly announced early in 1995.

Continued on page 90 ►

Contents

Articles

- 89 *The Lead Reference Centre*
- 90 *A guide for health care professionals on lead*
- 91 *Lead community groups in NSW*
- 92 *Measuring the amount of lead in indoor dust*
- 94 *Lead in dust and soil from day-care centres*
- 97 *Lead and environmental health in Broken Hill*

Letter to the editor

- 98 *Blood lead levels of children*

From the Public Health Units

- 99 *Update on lead-related activities*

Infectious Diseases

- 100 *November 1997*
- 103 *December 1997*
- 103 *Outbreak of gastroenteritis linked to eating pipsis*
- 104 *Avian influenza A (H5N1) in humans, Hong Kong, 1997*

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The Lead Reference Centre

► Continued from page 89

The Lead Reference Centre has been established within the Environment Protection Authority to coordinate the NSW Government's policy response to lead hazards in the environment and the implementation of the Lead Management Action Plan. It is funded until June 1999 by six NSW Government agencies: the Department of Housing, the Department of Public Works and Services, the Environment Protection Authority, the NSW Health Department, Roads and Traffic Authority and the WorkCover Authority. Its goal is to achieve a lead-safe NSW by minimising the health, environmental and economic impacts of lead contamination and other lead hazards for all population groups, occupations and ecosystems. A reduction in the impact of lead contamination will result in the continuing reduction of blood lead levels in the population.

The Lead Reference Centre has a broad role in coordinating the development, evaluation and reporting on NSW Government initiatives and policy responses across all levels of the NSW Government, as well as the management of lead hazards by the community, the private sector and industry. To support this effort, the centre will work with appropriate NSW Government agencies and the private sector to develop Statewide research, public education and industry training programs. The Lead Reference Centre will coordinate the development of a broad policy response and a large number of related standards, methods and guidelines required for the effective management of lead hazards in NSW.

Major projects of relevance to health care professionals include:

- the development of guidelines to manage lead hazards for environmental health officers;
- running regional briefing programs on lead for health and planning officers within local government, PHUs, WorkCover and the EPA;
- working with the Royal College of General Practitioners to develop lead teaching materials;
- the development of a major community education campaign planned for early 1998, targeting parents, renovators and lead industry workers; and
- the dissemination of educational materials for health care professionals through the health networks.

The Lead Reference Centre has six staff and is located with the Environmental Health, Food and Nutrition Branch of the NSW Health Department in the grounds of the Gladesville Hospital.

A GUIDE FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS ON LEAD

Richard Birdsey
Lead Reference Centre

The first major publication developed by the Lead Reference Centre is *Lead Safe: A guide for health care professionals*. The booklet was launched by the Minister for the Environment, Ms Pam Allan, in September, and has been distributed through the NSW health network by the NSW Health Department's Better Health Centre.

The guide is aimed at a range of health care professionals, including general practitioners, specialists, environmental health officers, early childhood nurses and parent educators. Information is provided on lead issues facing health care professionals, including:

- identifying groups vulnerable to the effects of lead, such as pregnant women, young children, renovators and lead industry workers;
- sources of environmental lead contamination;
- health effects of lead and how to identify them;
- testing for lead; and
- management and prevention of exposures (this includes guidelines based on the National Health and Medical Research Council action guidelines).

A comprehensive information section provides health care professionals with advice to give to patients on what to do to reduce their exposure to lead. A plain-English patient fact sheet – *Lead, your health and the environment* – has been developed to accompany the booklet.

Feedback provided by focus groups indicated that most health care professionals are deluged with information and would probably not read a large booklet. To assist readers, key information has been summarised into a single short section at the front of the booklet. Important points in the summary are cross-referenced to the main body of the text, where they are expanded on. This enables the user to find out more about topics of interest quickly and easily. A comprehensive reading list on lead and a directory of contacts for more information is also provided.

Copies of the booklet and accompanying fact sheet can be obtained by contacting the NSW Environment Protection Authority's Pollution Line on 131 555 during business hours.