Lead leaves lethal legacy

Posted by Zachary Lewis April 13, 2007 20:06PM

Categories: Breaking News

Fewer children in Northeast Ohio are being poisoned by lead, but society will feel the effects for generations.

Children who were poisoned as toddlers are growing up with learning disabilities and behavioral problems, burdening urban schools unprepared to deal with them.

Worse, as the children mature and have children of their own, they pass on the lead and create new generations of disadvantaged children. It's happening even among those who aren't sick.

"As long as children are lead-poisoned, there are going to be school failures," said Arizona-based analyst Michael Martin, a keynote speaker Friday at the annual meeting of the Greater Cleveland Lead Advisory Council. "Those who blame educators are willfully ignorant of the reason inner-city schools fail."

Scientific support for those assertions came from Kim Dietrich, associate director of Cincinnati Children's Environmental Health Center.

He cited long-term studies demonstrating that lead-poisoned children not only have lower IQs, delays in language development and attention deficit disorders,
Following children in Cincinnati, Dietrich found that every 5-microgram increase in long-term blood-lead levels increased the rate of arrests for violent offenses by 46 percent.

Furthermore, he said, chemical treatments are useful only for the heavily poisoned. "Drugs are not a panacea," he said. "Primary prevention is the only answer."

Children can be exposed to lead many ways: through paint, dust, gasoline and old plumbing fixtures. Toxicity stems from lead's ability to mimic calcium, which the body readily absorbs. Lead also passes easily from mother to child in the womb, even if mom never showed signs of poisoning.

In 2006, 11 percent of Cleveland children were found to have elevated blood levels. That represents a decline, but it's still well over the 1.6 percent average blood-lead level among children nationwide.

Little of this helps public schools, left with the burden of educating children whose struggles and misbehaviors may have biological causes.

Educators in the audience Friday pleaded for practical advice. The best response, they were told, is compassion. "Remember lead poisoning when you're dealing with that incorrigible kid," Martin said.

Looking ahead, experts Friday said cities need to continue to educate the public and eliminate lead while schools and doctors need to coordinate effective screening.

Joann Wasco, a psychologist with the Cleveland Municipal School District, said not to give up hope.

"Cleveland is starting to get on the bandwagon with this," she said. "Let's find things we can do."

See Greater Cleveland's Plan to Eliminate Childhood Lead Poisoning by 2010
See the State of Ohio Lead Elimination Plan
I attended and got a brain full. Martin's eye-opening study is here: http://www.azsba.org/lead.htm

Cleveland's lead levels are among the highest in the nation. Read the local data here: http://www.ehw.org/Lead/LEAD_home3.htm

OK, you can stop persecuting the teachers now. You can give them your empathy and appreciation for what they courageously contend with daily. You can reconsider your racist attitudes and consider that if you think black kids aren't as smart, you may want to look at where they live and the lead levels in their homes and surrounding playground soils. You can begin to question the motives of absentee landlords who rent to low income families in the city while they live in exurbia and send their kids to private academies. You say the charter schools are better? Well, I would want to know what percentage of the kids enrolled are lead poisoned and what extra resources they have been allocated to expand the special education or enrichment programs they can offer.

Most of us can feel empathy for the deaf or hearing impaired - did you know that lead poisoning can be a factor there? Did you know that Beethoven might have become deaf due to lead poisoning? Would our top notch orchestra take a stand gathering funds to combat the issue with performances of Beethoven's works?

Did you know that what is sometimes assumed to be ADD or ADHD could be misdiagnosed lead poisoning? They can appear the same.

It makes sense to renovate and upgrade the current school buildings in Cleveland, to enact and fund fully the plan to eliminate childhood lead poisoning by 2010 - more sense than a lot of the initiatives currently being considered uses of our tax dollars. It makes sense to allocate funds to help low income families in our central city replace windows and lead plumbing, encapsulate deteriorating lead paint and/or move to environmentally safe homes. It makes sense to test...
every child and to test expectant mothers and even when possible those in the
family planning stages.

If we were moving in Sam Miller's suggested county government, we might have
suburban voters willing to lend a tax dollar to help revive, heal and educate the
children in Cleveland's lead laden neighborhoods and schools. How much more
can we pile onto or extract from the poor people of the City of Cleveland who
already live in poisoned neighborhoods and contend with the violence that lead
poisoning begets?

Of course, with "countyism", we'd have to have more transparency and more
thoroughly considered decisions from the county than we have today. I wonder...
do you think perhaps Timmy and Jimmy suffer from childhood lead poisoning
when they cavalierly with the wave of a hand dismiss (or fail to do) the math on
razing the Cleveland Trust Tower for new county admin offices? Maybe they just
can't consider a big picture or add and subtract. Maybe they forgot the Forgotten
Triangle or didn't realize that the best place to build a "green building" is on a
brownfield. We sure have plenty of them in this shrinking city. Lets' put all the
factors on the table and see what are the big ideas, the better solutions for all the
near and long-term issue we face. Otherwise we may be just rearranging
deckchairs on the Titanic. Talk about collaboration and innovation... we surely
need it now. There won't be a silver bullet for this one, but rather a complex far
reaching connected plan to address the issues from the literal grassroots. Adding
a road, or a building or a business is not going to heal this hurt, this one is bigger
than all the little slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This one is outrageous
fortune itself.

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