BY WILLIAM G. WILKOFF, M.D.

LETTERS FROM MAINE

Heavy Metal Tales

Feet up on my desk, with my phone headset glued to my better ear, I was just extricating myself from the last call of the morning's half-hour call time. Sensing a presence behind me, I turned to find Allison, our newest receptionist, patiently waiting with a sheaf of unsigned health forms in her hand.

"I was eavesdropping on your last two calls," she said. "It sounds like you're not very worried about all this stuff I read about lead-containing toys from China."

"I guess I'm not disguising my impatience with the silliness of the whole thing," I replied. "Let me tell you a little story that might help explain my lack of enthusiasm for the current lead flap."

The story went something like this: When I was a preschooler, I and many of my peers played with toy soldiers made out of lead. But I was really into these little hand-painted warriors. I suspect that I had an army of at least 200 soldiers representing several different nations. I would line them up in a variety of battle formations and have them flank and outflank each other for hours. My father built me several elaborate storage trays as my collection grew. With heavy use, many of their hand-painted uniforms chipped off, exposing their lead bodies.

By the time I was 11, my interest had shifted to sports and building boat and airplane models. For one project, I needed some ballast, and I knew that lead had the weight-to-volume ratio that I wanted. So, I built myself some little ½-by-½-by-2-inch molds out of scrap wood I found in the basement. I asked my mother if I could borrow one of her old saucepans and I proceeded to melt down a third of my lead soldier collection on the kitchen stove. I carefully poured the molten lead into my molds and my little homemade ingots came out exactly as I had planned. And I continued to use them for a variety of projects over the next several years. My father was very upset because I had destroyed what he correctly suspected would have become a valuable collection in 20 years. Neither of my parents expressed any concern about my health.

While I never got straight A's in school, I still managed to graduate from college and an accredited medical school. In recent years, I have wondered how well I might have done had I not dabbled in metallurgy as a youngster, but I don't think I can blame lead for any of my numerous shortcomings.

So you can see that the tiny amounts of lead that have been getting so much attention don't get me very excited. However, when asked, I do suggest that parents toss out or return any toys that appear on the lead-tainted recall list. Not so much because I'm concerned about the lead, but because many of the toys are media driven and encourage more TV viewing.

Sadly, some of the parents who have become concerned about these toys also have been withholding valuable and potentially lifesaving vaccines based on irrational and unsubstantiated concerns about the safety of another heavy metal, mercury. But, don't get me wrong. Lead can be and still is a serious problem for some young children.

Fortunately, the young families who are buying and rehabbing old farmhouses here in Maine are generally well-educated and very aware of the risks of lead paint chips, dust, and plumbing. However, we still encounter problems with unscrupulous landlords who rent lead-contaminated apartments to economically disadvantaged families. We try to stay ahead of the problem with our screening tests, but we aren't perfect. Even when we identify a child at risk, the family often moves on, the apartment remains a problem, and another unsuspecting family moves in and the cycle goes on.

I could sense Allison was beginning to lose interest in my harangue. But, she politely thanked me for the anecdote and reminded me to "remember to please sign these forms." ■

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