

Hazardous Substances

Mr. Jim Caldwell (Essex—Kent): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to join in this debate this afternoon. I first want to say to the Hon. Member for Davenport (Mr. Caccia) that his ongoing concern in particular areas of the environment is always interesting. Then we have the new NDP critic, the Hon. Member for Broadview—Greenwood (Ms. McDonald). She left the committee which we feel is the most important, namely, the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture. Certainly we will miss her input. However, I am sure her interest will continue in the committee dealing with the environment. She has already created a reputation in that area. However, we miss her in the committee dealing with communications. Some of us still have some bad habits which the Hon. Member may have to come back to correct.

I also want to say that we are very pleased that the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) was present for most of the debate this afternoon. It is rather uncommon for a Minister to hear speeches during Private Members' hour, and we are certainly pleased he was here to listen to most of them.

I want to comment on the motion presented by the Hon. Member which refers to the permissible lead content in consumer paints. This is of great interest to all Members who have concerns about the environment, certainly those with young children who are most susceptible.

For many years the Department of Health and Welfare shared the concerns of the Member about undue exposure to lead by inhalation or ingestion. Certainly there are a number of sources which contribute to the total body burden of lead. They do not all come from paint alone. Daily exposures most commonly result from naturally occurring levels in food, airborne lead, especially in urban and industrialized areas, inhaled dust, and, to a lesser extent, from consumer products and even our drinking water. The Hon. Member's motion states that:

—the government should consider the advisability of reducing the allowable lead content in all consumer paints, particularly those used on products for children, from the existing level of 0.5 per cent to 0.06 per cent.

The level proposed is, as was pointed out, the regulated lead content of paint in the U.S. It was enacted into law by the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission on February 28, 1978. This content level was based on consideration of the extensive number of lead poisoning cases occurring in children from core areas of cities with deteriorating buildings. These old buildings contained painted woodwork and walls that contributed significantly to total lead intake in children who chewed upon painted wood or ingested chips of paint flaked from the walls. The 1978 rule of the U.S. commission superseded early legislation requiring paint to contain less than 0.5 per cent lead in 1976 and 1 per cent in 1971.

Canada has carefully considered the health effects of lead and acted promptly to reduce daily lead exposure in all segments of the population. Starting in 1969 the Government of Canada took action under the Hazardous Products Act to prohibit the sale of certain products containing lead above

specific ceilings. For example, all pencils and paint brushes as well as furniture and toys to be used by children may not be coated in paints containing more than 0.5 per cent total lead content; glazed ceramic cookware must not release lead in excess of seven parts per million when subjected to standard testing; paints sold to consumers for use inside or outside homes or on any furniture or product are regulated if they contain more than 0.5 per cent lead.

A number of food commodities have maximum tolerable limits prescribed under the Food and Drugs Act. The Department of the Environment acted to require lead levels in gasoline to be drastically reduced and eventually eliminated. Exposures to lead in the workplace have decreased dramatically over the decade.

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The Department is currently reviewing all lead regulations under the Hazardous Products Act and the Food and Drug Act to ensure that Canadians are adequately protected. In order to decide upon the need to further reduce the lead concentration in paint it is necessary to consider the health effects data that indicates the extent of lead intoxication in Canada, the most significant sources of human exposure to lead, and current uses of lead in paint.

From information obtained from Statistics Canada and contacts within Canadian hospitals, diagnosed cases of lead poisoning that can be attributed to ingestion of paints are rarely seen in Canada. In addition, the total number of cases of lead poisoning from all environmental sources has decreased since the early 1970s.

Canada never experienced the health problems associated with lead absorption from ingestion of lead paints to the same extent as seen in the United States. From 1950 to 1970 in that country it became clinically evident that children were being unduly exposed to high concentrations of lead through ingestion of paint chips, plaster, or old wallpaper saturated with paint found in houses constructed before 1940. Before 1940 lead compounds were more liberally used by the paint industry.

In 1978 the legislation in the United States establishing a ceiling on the lead content of household paint at 0.06 per cent was enacted in response to the crisis experienced at that time. The 0.06 per cent value was chosen because it represented the background concentration in paints to which lead had not been intentionally added. In addition to this legislation, large public health programs were initiated to remove the layers of paint from older urban housing. These two American initiatives as well as the greater public awareness of the problems associated with undue exposure to lead led to a reduction of blood-lead levels in children in the United States. Blood-levels in children in the United States are beginning to approach those found in Canadian children. Therefore, it is working.

It is often not clearly understood or explained that frequent reports of lead poisoning in children who had ingested paint