

Hazardous Substances

There are two primary causes of human exposure to lead. The first is the naturally occurring levels in food, and the second is through atmospheric particles which are inhaled. Lead is a normal constituent of the earth's crust and trace amounts of it are found naturally in water, soil and food. The Hon. Member's motion is directed specifically toward paint. However, there is little evidence to indicate that paint of itself is a significant contributor to human exposure to lead in Canada, even among children.

● (1750)

It is true that the public tends to associate lead poisoning with the ingestion of paint by children. Certainly, this issue received a great deal of attention particularly in the United States several decades ago. In fact, in the years before 1940 lead was commonly used in paint in concentrations a great deal higher than we find today. From 1950 to 1970 it became clinically evident in the United States that children were becoming unduly exposed to high concentrations of lead. These came through the ingestion of paint chips, plaster and old wallpaper that had been saturated with leaded paints. These sources of lead were found primarily in houses that had been constructed prior to 1940.

In response to this crisis, the United States passed legislation in 1978 that established a ceiling on the lead content of household paints. This ceiling was set at 0.06 per cent.

In addition, wide-scaled public health programs were set up to strip old paint from older urban housing. In brief, this was the source of public concern over lead in paints.

I believe it should be pointed out that, thankfully, Canada has never experienced the health problems associated with lead absorption from the ingestion of lead paints to the degree that has been found in the United States. According to information from Statistics Canada, formerly the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and compiled from data provided by Canadian hospitals, diagnosed cases of lead poisoning that can be attributed to the ingestion of paint are extremely rare in this country.

This experience is paralleled by information provided from other sources, such as medical associations, representations from consumer advocacy groups and the monitoring of consumer complaints. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that Canadians are already adequately protected from lead in paint through regulations for paint contained in the Hazardous Products Act.

Canada has an effective package of safety measures designed to limit the exposure of Canadians, particularly children, to lead, regardless of source. They are part of the over-all policy of the federal Government regarding lead, which is to control and reduce releases of lead into the environment.

The Hazardous Products Act to which I referred earlier limits the quantities of lead present in liquid coating materials.

Therefore, paints sold to consumers for use inside or outside the home, or for use on any furniture or household products are regulated if they contain more than 0.5 per cent lead. I should add that exposures to lead in Canadian workplaces have declined dramatically over the past decade.

Most important, Environment Canada has moved to drastically reduce lead levels in gasoline and will eventually eliminate lead from gasoline entirely. This is extremely significant because motor vehicles are the greatest single source of lead in the environment.

The Government is already taking effective action to protect Canadians from the deadly effects of lead, whatever the source. In the specific area of paint, which the Hon. Member's motion addresses, levels of lead in most paints produced today are already well below the present safeguard level of 0.5 per cent.

When accounts appear of lead poisoning in children who have ingested lead-containing paints, they are invariably linked to paints of type that have not been manufactured in North America for over 30 years. Modern technology, in combination with voluntary restraint on the part of paint manufacturers, has done away with the need for further restrictions such as those contained in the Hon. Member's motion.

For example, modern white paints contain titanium dioxide rather than lead as a pigment. Voluntary actions by paint manufacturers as well have led to the use of alternative non-lead pigments. At present, lead is only used in paint compounds where its technical properties make its replacement difficult. According to analyses routinely carried by Consumer and Corporate Affairs Canada, most paints have been found to contain lead only at levels considerably below the 0.5 per cent limit.

I suggest that Canadians are already well protected from lead in paints. Therefore, the Private Members' Motion of the Hon. Member for Davenport is unnecessary and I suggest that the energies of the House could better be directed toward more genuine and pressing environmental and health concerns that confront Canadians, such as the clean-up of the Great Lakes and the Niagara River.

Mrs. Barbara Sparrow (Calgary South): Madam Speaker, I want to address Private Members' Motion M-54 which was introduced by the Hon. Member for Davenport (Mr. Caccia).

This motion was ostensibly drafted to address one aspect of the problem of lead in the environment. There is no doubt that lead is an element highly toxic to both humans and the environment. Exposure to high levels of lead can cause serious and acute symptoms. Fortunately, advances in industrial hygiene have virtually eliminated acute lead poisoning.

However, chronic exposure to low levels of lead in the environment is also a serious health concern. Low levels of lead are known to interfere with haemoglobin synthesis. They are suspected of causing neuro-physiological and behavioural