

Heads Up: Editorial blog

January 2019: Taking the Lead on Lead Exposure

Like many others I had been led to believe that in 21st Century Britain most people's exposure to dangerous amounts of heavy metals came in the form of Miss Scarlet wandering into a study brandishing a piece of lead piping. But, [surveillance reports](#) carried out by Public Health England (PHE) and the British Paediatric Surveillance Unit (BPSU) show that this isn't merely a fictional concern, and that whilst the "lead piping" in Cluedo may be fake, the dangers surrounding lead exposure are real – it's present in the soil, but also in some paints, herbal medicines, and, believe it or not, toys - all sources that children can be in frequent contact with.

This isn't just a theoretical concern either. For starters, [elevated lead levels are associated with intellectual disability](#), but they can also [contribute to the incidence of ischaemic heart disease](#). The difficulty is that children with elevated levels of lead in their body may not always present with the symptoms and signs well known to clinicians like [pica](#), [appetite loss](#) and [anaemia](#).

So, my question to you all out there is, when did you last check a child's lead levels? Actually, I have several other questions:

- Do you know how common elevated lead levels are?
- Do you know under what circumstances you should check a child's lead levels?
- Do you know what the differentials of lead toxicity are?

That's an awful lot of questions, and I don't have an awful lot of answers.

But then this blog's raison d'être is not to pretend that it is a source of instant answers or advice, nor on this occasion can it point you in the direction of robust national level guidance for UK clinicians that will answer all the above questions. Its point, this month, is to raise awareness of an issue that the team have become aware of, and which we think you should be aware of too, and to then point you in the direction of reports you might want to go and look at. They are well worth reading and the surveillance report highlights some important recommendations:

"Build and strengthen relationships between public health, paediatrics and other related clinical specialties to improve reporting of children with raised blood lead concentrations, and provide a more timely public health response."

The report further recommends that all cases of childhood elevated blood lead concentration be referred to public health organisations, even if the source of exposure appears to be obvious, in order that remediation for the case and other vulnerable children can take place.

But for now, that is it from me. I am off to iron out a few other PCO UK bits and pieces, but I will steal some more moments next month to bring you more unalloyed and polished puns and thus test the mettle of everyone's sense of humour!