Is the work of Lead Safe Mama "Fear Mongering"?

[URL: https://tamararubin.com/2020/05/i-dont-do-what-i-do-to-spread-fear-i-do-what-i-do-to-educate-so-you-can-make-informed-choices-for-your-family/]

MAY 31, 2020 · 2 COMMENTS

I don't do what I do to instill fear. I do what I do to educate, so YOU can make informed choices for your family.

Is what I report on this blog "fear-mongering"?

Yesterday an article was shared with me that mentioned me and my advocacy work. This blog post here, today – on my website, is by way of a rebuttal – addressing not only a few misconceptions articulated in that particular piece, but also comments and critical reactions to my work that have appeared (and reappeared) over the years.

How to report an EPA RRP Lead Paint Renovation and Repair Violation in Progress.

by Lead Safe Mama

Play Video

While, as I said, this post was not written only in response to that piece from yesterday, in the piece the author contends that it is relatively useless to simply know whether or not something contains Lead. The allegation sounds reasonable enough at first glance: that simply *knowing* that any particular example of a consumer good – even a plate, mug, bowl or other dishware – "merely" *contains* Lead serves no function; that only if something has *confirmed currently leachable / bioavailable* Lead is that information of any value.

I emphatically disagree.

I actually believe the opposite. Simply knowing if something has Lead (or Mercury, or Arsenic, etc.) puts consumers in a position of power in making choices for their family and for the health of our environment.

Consumers have a right to know what they are buying — particularly if the items include neurotoxic elements.

I think all consumers have a right to know if the products they buy for their home (or use every day) "*merely" contain* Lead (or Mercury, Arsenic, Cadmium, Antimony or any other toxic heavy metals)! Moreover, leach-testing on every single item ever made would obviously be wildly cost-prohibitive, and as a practical matter would also be impossible – but knowing if a manufactured consumer item contains (or is likely to contain) Lead or other highly neurotoxic metals (using high-precision XRF technology) is a very important piece of information that families can use to make informed choices for their household.

The fact of the matter is that if we *had advance knowledge* that something contained **20,000** or **50,0000** — or even "only" **10,000 ppm Lead**, most of us would likely *choose* to not purchase (or otherwise acquire) that particular item for use in our home. This is especially true if the item in question is something intended for *food use*, in our kitchens or dining rooms. That we (as humans) are likely to choose non-toxic options (over items with heavy metals) is even more likely when you consider how many *non*-toxic / Lead-*free* options are

out there [and surprisingly, that in most cases the Lead-free options are also often the *least-expensive options*!]

Giving people *access to information* regarding the historic (or current) use of toxicants in the manufacture of particular consumer goods does not, by default, automatically incite or encourage *fear*. I do acknowledge that *some* people are fearful – over many things. Some people are ignorant, misinformed, confused or overwhelmed; others have been traumatized, and may have developed [diagnosed or un-diagnosed] *OCD* over their fear of the toxicants in our world. That does not – *must not* – trump the importance of disclosing toxicants [*still*] widely used in the manufacturing of consumer products (or prevalent in family heirlooms we may use daily.)

Few people are doing this work

Given *no public agency* is looking at many categories of these currently -manufactured products commonly found in our homes [not to mention, *vintage* products] I contend the work I do *is* of value — because it provides specific information to families that no one else is providing (again – so they can make their own *informed choices, based on scientifically replicable accurate data*).

I am very careful with language in all of my posts and work hard at *not* indulging in *sensational* posts *or click-bait headlines*, nor any *needlessly alarming, or exaggerated statements* on my blog. It is very important to me that the information I share is *simple*, *factual* and consistently *science-based (and that all consumer goods test results reported are replicable*.)

There are only a few specific types (or *brands*) of products that I consider *inherently very unsafe* [because of their function and usage in a typical home, and risk of consequent (possibly *chronic)* exposure to the toxicants used]. In those few cases, I endeavor to be clear and explicit about my concerns with these products. [Some examples of more concerning products: *all Franciscan Potteries china*, *colourful vintage Pyrex bowls, and pre-2010* Tupperware.]

I am not fear-mongering

Most of my readers (this includes more than 1,948,000 readers in 2019 alone – in more than 200 countries) do *not* react to what I write with *fear*. *Most* read the words without "reading between the lines" (*looking* for – i.e. *making up* – some kind of "tacit" meaning beyond my words) and most use the information provided to make informed choices.

Beyond any possible direct health risks or concerns (for the end user of any given product), there are also legitimate environmental issues surrounding the mining, refining, and use of toxic heavy metals in consumer products. But any "*fear"/hysteria* around this information is counter-productive – and arises in the individual reader – in that person's unintended

interpretation or *inappropriate response* to the posting of the simple routine *factual scientific test results* I publish [*normally* shared intentionally *devoid of any emotional charge* and always shared without *baseless allegations or assertions*.]

Lead is incontrovertibly toxic – in extremely small amounts / at very low exposure levels. This is a fact.

If the presence of Lead were not *inherently problematic at even very low levels,* the information shared on this blog might arguably *not* be valuable or relevant information. However, the mere *presence of any Lead in a* ***child's*** *environment* has been well-documented to be inherently problematic — at *remarkably* low levels [so low that after researchers reached the consensus that there is *no known "low threshold of toxicity" for Lead,* our public health agencies in the U.S. and internationally eventually acknowledged this fact, *and officially and universally moved to include the language that "there is no safe level of Lead exposure"*].

If you are blasé about newly-manufactured consumer goods that contain *high* levels of Lead (Leaded brass, Lead fishing weights, Lead crystal) then *your focus is too narrow*. If you don't have any concern for Lead in products of these types at the levels typically found (because as-of-yet no one has "proven to *you*" the impact to the end user for these products), then you are obviously *not looking at the bigger picture.*

There's a bigger picture here, the planet.

The bigger picture is the concern for the *entire lifecycle* of any product that incorporates high amounts of Lead — and the very real risks to many people all along *the supply chain.* This includes risks to the miners that mine the Lead (and other toxicants) for the raw materials for these products, risks to the workers that make the products, and perhaps most important – the impact on the human habitat. The larger environmental impacts range from the *highly toxic waste* produced in mining and refining of Lead; to global pollution from emissions generated through manufacturing Leaded products; and ultimately including the issues created at the end-of-life for Lead-containing products with disposal (and even the potential contamination of the manufacturing chain for recycled goods.)

The world does not revolve simply around any one of us. If the air we breathe and the water we drink and the soil we grow our crops in are *fundamentally contaminated* with Lead from manufacturing, mining, refining, use, and reclaiming or disposal of Leaded products – we – as stewards of the Earth – bear *responsibility* for those contaminations, too.

"OCD" or not?

While the biggest human impact problem (when it comes to Lead) is, first-and-foremost *Lead-contaminated dust in older housing and other buildings that were historically painted with Lead paint*, being concerned about the very real additional presence and impact of Lead in *consumer goods* is not "OCD".

If the still-largely-unstudied/undetermined specific impact of *lower and lower* levels of exposure were not a concern, public health agencies across the globe would ***not*** have set the toxicity level for Lead in consumer goods at ***90 to 100 parts per million***. Consumer goods have the potential to cause harm at very low levels. This is why these government standards have been set. However it is well beyond the capacity of any government to test all things for safety.

In the absence of the government testing of all things – just because something has not yet been proven to be harmful, does not mean it is safe. And thus people like me play a role in nudging scientific research and public policy along in the right direction, shifting public concern in a way that encourages scientists to do further study. To wit – years after activists (including me) began testing and reporting unsafe levels of Lead in *coffee mugs*, a formal study was done concluding that this was actually a problem. Years after activists (including me) began reporting unsafe levels of Lead in *vintage plastic toys*, two formal studies were undertaken, concluding this was actually a problem. Years after activists (including me) began reporting unsafe levels of Lead in the *painted decorations of functional (relatively modern) glassware*, a study was done (in England), concluding this was actually a problem. I am actually just about to publish some new ground-breaking findings about Lead in vintage books and I expect these findings (which are scientifically replicable) will likely precipitate further study by a scientific body. (*I will post that link here as soon as it is published.*)

Someone has to start the conversation

To those cynics who may be resistant to accepting "new" scientific information — tending to remain *highly sceptical* until such information is *widely acknowledged at a cultural level:* in every field there must be early pioneers.

Just because someone is a pioneer in reporting seemingly "*new"* facts or "*new"* concerns does not *invalidate* those concerns (just be patient…there's always a lag between a first discovery, subsequent related *scientific findings* and *popular knowledge*). [*Let's see how the timeline plays out with my new findings around vintage books!]*

Learning about Lead in household goods is a great introduction (to the larger Lead issue) for new moms

In addition to all of the above considerations, some conversations (like the concern for Lead in dishware) happen to be a great introduction to the subject of the concerns for Lead in our environment (overall). *Everyone* has *dishes*. *Everyone* also has (or had) a *mother* and a *grandmother* — and therefore *everyone* (or nearly everyone) has had interaction with potentially high-Lead *dishes from past generations*.

While I have worked with many families who were actually *poisoned* by their toxic *dishes,* in the scope of things, I don't in fact see this as a *primary* threat (statistically, relative to other sources of Lead exposure), but I do see the topic of Lead in consumer goods as an impactful

"*gateway*" / *introduction, introducing young families* to the concerns for Lead exposure as it relates to them and their lives (especially impactful for young parents who have not previously thought of Lead-poisoning as potentially "*their*" problem.)

If parents become aware about the potential for Lead in their dishes (whether or not their dishes might contribute to a child's specific blood lead level) they may get their child tested. If their child is tested and is negative for Lead – great! If their child gets tested and is positive for Lead in their blood the parents will likely start looking around their home for other exposure sources (including sources of Lead dust from deteriorating paint.) With the limited resources available today to combat childhood Lead poisoning, anything encouraging an increase in childhood blood Lead testing is a step forward.

Young parents don't want to think of their house as toxic. It is too confronting.

Most families are reluctant to explore the potential concern of Lead paint in their homes. The financial liability of that inquiry is too much to bear, both in the short and long term. However examining the concern for Lead in consumer goods is a manageable task (dishes, to continue the example above – are inexpensive and easy to replace with modern Lead-free alternatives.) Exploring the concern for Lead in consumer goods is a path to helping families discover an issue (and learn how it may or may not relate to their family) in a way that is less confronting (and less expensive) than testing their entire home – and therefore it has value.

Lead is *everyone's* problem — and the age-old conundrum is: how do we get everyone to see this? We are fighting against *more than a century* of marketing efforts by the Lead industry – marketing efforts designed to make us numb to the concern for Lead; marketing efforts specifically designed to make us think "this is not *my* problem, this is *someone else's* problem." By introducing people to the FACT that there is *Lead* in *their* dishware – you are opening their minds to the FACT that this is everyone's problem, and that we all should consider the value of getting Lead out of our homes and environments.

But some Lead is useful in consumer products, right?

I disagree with this assertion 100%.

As Dr. Mark Pokras says in my film, I wish we could create legislation that says "Thou shalt not use Lead in *anything, period*!" It is 2020; today we have alternatives for every application in which Lead was previously used. Uses like Lead in *car-batteries* are now roughly 100-years-old, and there is no reason we should continue this practice. Car batteries absolutely DO poison the planet – the Lead in car batteries is neither unavoidable nor safe. While it is oft-cited as the most "recyclable" source of Lead (and I understand the *Lead mining industry* considers the recoverability/reusability of the Lead in car batteries to be a *problem* that needs to be *addressed!*) it is not ultimately a *necessary* use of Lead — and there are still grave environmental implications with the use of Lead in this way.

In conclusion

In the meantime, (to those who are dismissing / mischaracterizing my work – as "fear-mongering"), *please stop trying to invalidate the work of honest, hard-working advocates simply trying to inform families so they can make intelligent choices for their families – choices not based on double-speak and marketing language provided by manufacturers, but choices based on data and facts and numbers*.

Just because the long-term human implications of something has not yet been well-studied — like what happens to someone's body if they "only drink out of Leaded crystal *every now and then",* or if they drink "*really quickly* when they do" [*two actual "objections" to my recommendation to avoid ever drinking from Leaded crystal*] — why would you risk putting one of the most neurotoxic substances known to man up against your lips – when *you can buy a Lead-free alternative for one dollar?!**

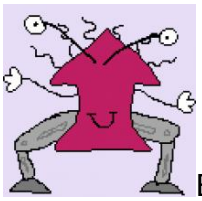
Thank you for reading.

Tamara Rubin
#LeadSafeMama

***[*Here's an example of a wine glass on Amazon for about $2.50 per glass. While I have not tested this exact glass, it is advertised as Lead-free (link)- but check out any dollar store or Walgreens or similar for a $1 per glass version!*]**

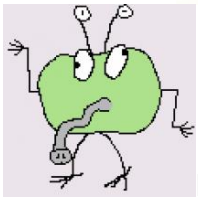
Amazon links are affiliate links. If you purchase something after clicking on one of my links I may receive a small percentage of what you spend at no extra cost to you.

Comments

1.  E says
MAY 31, 2020 AT 5:51 PM

Hi Tamara,

Do you have any metal loafpan recommendations?

2.  Maria says

JUNE 1, 2020 AT 4:43 AM

I appreciate your work! You can't fix what you don't know. As I learn from you, I have been able to replace, and make better buying choices for our household. I am appalled at the "bad stuff" out there in things we use daily. I am most definitely grateful for the knowledge.

Editor's Note: while seeking permission to reprint the above article, I asked Tamara Rubin the following question, and she kindly provided the answer below.

Elizabeth O'Brien's question about negative and positive blood lead results:

I'd be very grateful if you'd clarify (for our international audience) what you mean by a negative blood lead result and a positive blood lead result. Is it possible for you to replace those words "negative" and "positive", with "below xxx ug/dl (micrograms per decilitre)" and "xxx ug/dl or above" respectively?

Tamara Rubin's response, 29th June 2020

Actually. I do not think replacing "negative" and "positive" with numbers is relevant or helpful. "Negative" = ***zero*** (***no*** Lead detected) and "positive" = ***some*** amount of Lead present (some Lead detected.) The intention is that we are hoping to spark inquiry into Lead in the home and environment to encourage testing and education. There ***is no low "threshold"*** for negative, other than an absolute zero (which I also do understand is ***uncommon*** - and often impossible to achieve in the modern world with current testing methodologies).

The outcome of encouraging testing with those "absolutes" is that likely ***everyone*** will test ***positive*** if they have an accurate test (or - unfortunately - negative if their doctor uses a test with a low threshold of 3.3 or 2.0 or 5.0 or whatever) - and accordingly everyone should be incentivized to take on the inquiry of the impact of Lead in their homes (lives, and communities). I have written another entire post addressing that (*** see below) and I think ranking relative levels of positive exposure is a notion that should not be entertained in this context. Said another way, any result over zero should be seen as concerning and should spark an inquiry - whenever possible.

*** https://tamararubin.com/2019/02/blood-lead-testing-please-get-everyone-in-the-family-tested-since-you-have-been-living-in-a-house-with-high-lead-paint/

I don't know if you are familiar with the work of Dr. Rabito (on low level lead exposure) - but I discuss that here:

https://tamararubin.com/2019/07/today-is-my-youngest-sons-11th-birthday-happy-birthday-

charlie-parker-eliezer-rubin-the-story-of-how-lead-impacted-his-birth/

And also this is a great article if you have not yet read it (not written by me):

https://tamararubin.com/2017/01/toxic_lead/

Tamara E. Rubin
#LeadSafeMama
LeadSafeMama.com