



Opinion: Eliminating lead paint would save millions of lives

Perry Gottesfeld and Johnson Ongking

PUBLISHED: November 28, 2018 at 6:45 am | UPDATED: November 28, 2018 at 6:53 am

[The following op-ed published in the Mercury News <https://www.mercurynews.com/2018/11/28/opinion-eliminating-lead-paint-would-save-millions-of-lives/> was co-authored along with Johnson Ongking, the head of the largest paint company in the Philippines and partner of Perry Gottesfeld's Occupational Knowledge (OK) International in launching the Lead Safe Paint certification.]

Paint companies are expected to pay hundreds of millions of dollars for lead paint abatement in California after the U.S. Supreme Court last month refused to intervene in an 18-year legal battle.

Although this litigation was mostly about what the companies did years ago, few realize that it is still legal to manufacture and use lead paint in the United States and in most countries around the world. This case should be a wakeup call to finally eliminate lead paint.



Photo: 2017 Volcano Art Prize Entry. Title: Peeling lead paint polluting patios and potato patches by Isla Macgregor.
<http://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/peeling-lead-paint-polluting-patios-and-potato-patches>

A few countries, including the Philippines, have banned lead paint for all applications and some of the largest global paint manufacturers have removed lead from their products.

Yet Sherwin Williams, the largest defendant in the California case, has refused to do so and they are not alone. Today thousands of companies around the world continue to manufacture lead paint and lead pigments despite the hazards.

Lead is known to irreparably damage children's brains and is associated with delinquent behaviors. The cost in lost earnings alone total almost a trillion dollars per year and is disproportionately impacting the poorest countries. In addition, exposures to lead results in at least 674,000 deaths annually primarily due to cardiovascular disease.

As the California case demonstrated, the hazards of lead paint have been known for more than 100 years, but in most countries the lead content of paint is unregulated. Instead the decision to continue to use lead additives is left to paint manufacturers. It is not every day that a company can make a simple decision to literally save millions of lives, but that is the situation these companies face.



There are no technological nor business reasons for continuing the use of these hazardous products, yet independent testing from around the world shows that lead paint is still commonly sold in stores for residential and other applications.

In 2009, over 120 countries at a United Nations chemicals management convention voted unanimously to eliminate lead in paint. Since that historic vote, only a handful of countries have put in place comprehensive regulations to implement this decision. Even in the United States, where millions of dollars are spent every year to abate lead paint hazards, it is still legal to apply these hazardous products on water tanks, roadways and industrial facilities.

It is rare for industry to sit down with its critics from the nonprofit sector and agree to change its practices. However, as a representative of the largest paint company in the Philippines and an international organization spearheading efforts to eliminate lead paint globally, we worked together since 2013 to launch an independent certification program to recognize companies that reformulate their products without lead additives.

The Lead Safe Paint Certification has now certified paint companies in three Asian countries and provided assurance to consumers that such paints do not exceed established lead levels. In countries with weak enforcement, third-party independent certification can play a key role in providing oversight.

Too many paint companies, both large and small, have ignored this opportunity to reformulate their products. Clearly, government regulation is needed but this must be accompanied by significant outreach efforts to educate paint companies and the public on these hazards. Only then will consumers demand safer products.

Corporate social responsibility has become mainstream, but few of these programs offer greater possibilities than the simple act of eliminating lead paint. Reducing lead exposures will save lives, improve educational outcomes, and save countries hundreds of millions of dollars.

That is the opportunity that paint companies around the world face today. Let us hope that they do not unnecessarily poison another generation before they act.

Perry Gottesfeld is the executive director of Occupational Knowledge International, a nongovernmental organization based in San Francisco. Johnson Ongking is vice president of Pacific Paint (Boysen) Philippines, Inc.



LEAD SAFE PAINT®

<http://www.okinternational.org/lead-paint/Certification>

Occupational Knowledge International spearheaded efforts to launch the world's first certification program for paints without added lead. The certification is intended to assist governments to regulate the paint industry with independent third-party conformity assessment and provide an even playing field for responsible paint companies.

Lead Safe Paint® is an independent, third party certification program that provides assurance to consumers that the paint they are purchasing contains less than 90 parts per million (ppm) lead. Additional information on the certification program is found here: <https://www.lead safepaint.org/>

The Lead Safe Paint® certification standard and Information on applying for certification can be found here: <https://www.scsglobalservices.com/services/lead-safe-paint>
