

Procrastination on public health goals is endangering children, experts warn

June 11 2014, by Joanna Wheatley



Blood lead levels are rising by some measures in Port Pirie and Broken Hill.

Although Australia continues to be a world leader in lead metal mining, smelting and processing, international scientists have raised urgent concerns in a new Environment International paper about a lack of understanding on the hazards of these operations.

"The lead pandemic is not a problem of the past," says lead author Professor Mark Taylor.

"There is now an overwhelming body of evidence showing that Australia's lead level for children is too high. We're asking why would it take Australia's leading public health body, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHRMC) so long – from 2012--2014 – to undertake what appears to be a review of reviews. Are they anticipating that they might conclude something different from other global experts?"

In their report, Taylor, Professor Chris Winder and Professor Bruce Lanphear show how childhood blood lead levels have fallen sharply across the world's developed countries in recent decades, as a result of work by the WHO and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

However, Australian policy responses have stalled, despite "the incontrovertible evidence that adverse neurocognitive and behavioural effects occur at levels well below the current national goal of 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$ ", the paper reports.

"This delayed response is happening when blood lead levels are actually rising by some measures in two of Australia's three primary lead mining and smelting cities: Port Pirie, South Australia and Broken Hill, New South Wales," says Taylor.

The authors argue that urgent changes are required to both state and national policy approaches, to bring them inline with contemporary international standards.

They recommend a lower blood lead intervention level of no more than 5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$, with a national goal for all children under 5 years of age to have a

[blood lead](#) level of below 1 µg/dL by 2020.

The scientists warn that procrastination on this issue will be "the thief of an equitable and healthy start to life for Australia's lead-exposed children."

More information: Mark Patrick Taylor, Chris Winder, Bruce P. Lanphear, "Australia's leading public health body delays action on the revision of the public health goal for blood lead exposures," *Environment International*, Volume 70, September 2014, Pages 113-117, ISSN 0160-4120, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2014.04.023](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2014.04.023).

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