

ITHACA TIMES

CITY

Waste Watching

Lead poisoning poses a contamination threat in Fall Creek

Through out the past two or more decades the U.S. has made great progress in pinpointing the presence of lead in the environment as posing serious and potentially deadly health risks to the public. Specifically, those most at risk are small children; with lead factoring in as a cause for respiratory illnesses such as allergies, asthma, lower IQ, brain damage and behavioral problems. Though adults are less vulnerable to lead poisoning because their body systems are fully developed, as lead builds up in the body it can cause damage to the brain, kidneys, nerves and blood cells.

Government regulations in the U.S. have eliminated some of the proven factors that put the public at risk for lead related health problems. The most obvious ways that lead has been removed from the environment was from gasoline and paint. Lead that was used in pipes and in plumbing has since made its way into drinking water. Other forms of lead exposure came from industrial waste, such as that from the former Ithaca gun factory, and hobby materials such as stained glass, paints, solders and fishing weights.

What happens when lead gets into the environment? Rodney Deitert Professor of Immunotoxicology at Cornell explains some of its origins and its affect on the

bodies immune system. "We are beginning to appreciate what we once thought as safe to have negative health implications. Some of the concerns about lead can have their affects in the embryonic and juvenile stages of development. We are just now beginning to pay for prior practices in the use of lead."

"I work on the immune system," say Deitert. "Lead is a risk factor for childhood asthma. My own study is on animals during pregnancy. One thing we do know is that exposure to certain doses of lead does not affect the immune system of the mother but it is passed on to the fetus."

According to Dr. Eric Kossoff, a pediatric neurologist in residency at Johns Hopkins Medical Institution in Baltimore, "Lead is a well-known toxin, almost exclusively to children. Acute lead toxicity is quite rare. When it does occur children will become drowsy, irritable, and then will often have seizures and cerebral edema. Obviously, this can be a life-threatening condition requiring intensive care unit care. I have never seen a case of this in my training, nor have many others I work with at Hopkins."

Carol Mohler, a nurse with The Tompkins County Health Department Lead Program says that "children under the age of five are especially at risk to lead poisoning because their nervous system is growing rapidly and are using their hands to explore and they are mouthing like crazy." In 1993 it was written into law by the New York State legislature that children be given a blood lead test at the age of one and two. "We recommend the child



METAL FATIGUE: "CLEAN-UP COULD BE MASSIVELY EXPENSIVE," WARNS WALTER HANG, HOLDING A HANDFUL OF FALL CREEK LEAD.

PHOTO: TACMY MEER

be assessed for risk at six months. We screen pregnant women as well to see if they are at risk."

Regarding the recent disclosure of ten tons of dumped lead shot found at the former Ithaca Gun factory Fall Creek site Walter Hang says, "The City should do what it can to be conservative about protecting the peoples health. So far no one has done anything; our Mayor has impaled our city on the clean up liability hook. Clean-up could be massively expensive in the long run for the taxpayers, because of the pollution leaking on to the ground and flowing directly into Fall Creek and Cayuga Lake".

To underscore the reluctance of government agencies in dealing with the potential health hazards regarding the Ithaca Gun site, Hang points out that to this date no signs have been posted to warn the public of the potential dangers the site may pose. Both the Mayors office and the DEC were unavailable for comment. Claire Pospisil, a spokeswoman for the NYS Health Department public relations office did provide a statement. "We have visited the site to make an assessment and will confer with the DEC about what kinds of remediation needs to be done, and what recommendations on interim measures that need to be taken. Currently the area is inaccessible to young children between the ages of two and six and they are the most vulnerable."

The Ithaca Gun Fall Creek Site area is inaccessible in the sense that the steep terrain with drops of over one hundred feet in some areas makes for some challenging hiking. Still there are well worn paths in the most difficult climbing areas, which indicate this area is being used on a regular basis. Lead that remains on the ground migrates into the water and flows into Cayuga Lake during rain fall. And what about those unsuspecting adventurers out for a day of exploring the Ithaca Gun Area on those well worn paths that lead to the spectacular waterfall? In the summer months especially, what person could not resist at least taking off their shoes and wading in the water?

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