

LEAD EXPOSURE IN AFRICA: GIVE IT THE ATTENTION IT DESERVES

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Background and Aims: Lead is one of the most studied toxicant in scientific literature. Great decreases in lead concentrations in environmental media in developed industrialized countries have been achieved, and therefore, BLLs have decreased drastically in last decades. This has been considered as one of the greatest public health successes. However, in developing world, especially in African countries, lead still being an important public health concern. The demographic transition, in addition to the great efforts maintained to eradicate infectious diseases, gave rise to an epidemiologic transition in African countries, moving to more chronic diseases. The aim of this study was to assess efforts accomplished to eradicate lead poisoning in African countries, evaluate how public health actors deal with this issue and in a wider objective, how environmental health hazards are perceived.

Methods: We have reviewed the literature concerning lead exposure issue in African countries. As conducted studies in these countries are few, we extended the research to reports from international organizations such as WHO, UNEP and UNIDO and some newspaper articles.

Results: Except in South Africa where many studies have dealt with this issue, there is few and sparse data from other countries. Sources of lead exposure in Africa remain various, and range from mining and recycling activities to leaded paints and some cosmetics and medicinal products. No African country has a national lead surveillance program.

Conclusion: As in developed countries, BLLs have decreased in African countries during the last years thanks to ban of leaded gasoline. However, they are still very higher (i.e. 26% of South African children have BLLs > 10 µg/dL, 2009). In general, environmental health issues are neglected in health politics compared to endemic communicable diseases and new approaches are needed to deal with these issues still considered as inconsequential issues. Lead exposure remains a public health problem of global dimensions in Africa knowing its interactions with educational, social and economic growth. Developed countries have an important role in promoting new visions and to export accumulated knowledge through exchange programs in education, health economics and prevention.