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Dedicated to improving public health through innovative strategies to reduce hazards in communities around the world.

Occupational Knowledge International

www.okinternational.org

Editorial: We Need to Better Protect Health Workers from Covid-19

Like many occupational hygienists we have been concerned by the confusing and counterproductive messaging around the airborne transmission of Covid-19. Infectious disease specialists rely on outdated nomenclature to characterize virus particles based on size making a distinction between “droplets” and “aerosols.” In reality health workers and the public have to be informed about the risk of airborne virus at whatever size in order to take precautions. The inability to communicate the risk of airborne transmission has been apparent to health workers and has caused much confusion among the public.

The pandemic has also pointed out how poorly health workers are protected – both in developing countries and in wealthy countries. We already know that despite the use of surgical masks and N95s, health workers are becoming infected and account for [19% of all cases](#) in the U.S. Instead of seeing this as a workplace crisis, the advice from WHO and national health officials has not significantly changed as health workers are still relying on inadequate protection. In the U.S., the [National Academies of Sciences issued a report](#) just last year calling for the widespread use of reusable respirators for routine use and especially during anticipated pandemic surges. But six months into the pandemic their recommendations seem to be almost completely ignored.

Some occupational hygienists and unions have argued that instead of relying on disposable masks, hospitals and clinics should move to more protective elastomeric respirators (with high-efficiency cartridges) that provide better protection and are reusable. These respirators would be less expensive over time as they can be disinfected and used repeatedly for months or even years. A [study outlining the experience of a large hospital group](#) published in June indicates that reusable respirators offer better protection at 1/10th of the cost of disposable N95 masks.

Unfortunately, very few health care workers have been provided with these more protective respirators and remain at risk. Recognizing that we are in for a long-term crisis with ongoing shortages in supplies, the [New York State Nurses Association issued this useful guidance](#).

Given the prevalence of Tuberculosis (TB) and other airborne infectious diseases in many countries around the world, there is even a stronger argument to be made for these more protective respirators in low and middle-income countries. This is especially true given the shortages and price increases experienced in purchasing disposable N95 masks.

Similarly, despite the shortage of disposable protective clothing, few healthcare providers have endorsed the use of reusable options. Barrier effectiveness is the same for reusable gowns and disposable gowns with the same barrier rating. A [study published in 2018](#) compared to the use of disposable to reusable gown system for hospitals. They showed a 28% reduction in energy consumption, a 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, a 41% reduction in water consumption, and a 93% reduction in solid waste generation with the reusable option.

CDC Convenes New Lead Advisory Committee

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched a new advisory committee on lead exposure prevention to replace the Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention (ACCLPP) that was shut down in 2013. The new Lead Exposure Prevention Advisory Committee (LEPAC) met virtually for the first time on April 29, 2020. It took several years for the agency to finally activate this advisory committee as per a Congressional mandate that followed the Flint water crisis.

The group is charged with advising the agency to further lead poisoning prevention efforts. Importantly, unlike the ACCLPP, this committee is also charged with addressing lead exposures among adults and has a member from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

Occupational Knowledge International provided formal comments during the public participation session and proposed a specific five-point action plan for the LEPAC to consider. Our proposed priorities include:

- Updating the CDC blood lead reference level;
- Investing in improved blood lead testing equipment to help increase testing access;
- Addressing inconsistent older U.S. standards for soil and dust lead hazards;
- Calling on the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to update the current 1970s-era occupational lead exposure standards; and
- Taking action to push for a ban on lead paint and lead in plastics.

U.S. EPA Finds Asbestos Poses a Significant Risk

The U.S. EPA recently concluded that current uses of asbestos in the U.S. pose a significant risk to workers and bystanders supporting the need for a ban on importing, exporting, manufacturing, and using all asbestos-containing materials. In March, [EPA released its Draft Risk Evaluation for Asbestos under the Toxic Substances Control Act \(TSCA\)](#) review of the current uses of asbestos in the U.S. This action followed the prioritization of asbestos as one of the top 10 toxic substances to be reviewed under this new provision. As envisioned, this is a first step in implementing additional regulations or controls.

However, the draft document has multiple deficiencies and is far from comprehensive in failing to account for all forms of asbestos, all uses of asbestos, and asbestos that is present in millions of homes, buildings and other structures. EPA indicated that they plan to address legacy uses of asbestos and waste disposal in a separate document.

OK International provided comments on the draft document to EPA and noted the contradiction of stating that imported asbestos-containing products do not present an unreasonable risk while concluding that asbestos diaphragms, gaskets, brake blocks, brakes and other vehicle friction products present an unreasonable risk to health. As asbestos is no longer mined in the U.S., and all the products evaluated are imported, it is unclear how they came to this conclusion.

J&J Stops Selling Talc Baby Powder Only in U.S. and Canada

After decades of fighting off regulators and lawsuits regarding the asbestos content of Johnson & Johnson Baby Powder, the Company finally announced in May that it would “wind down” North American sales of the product. The company has lost some major court battles in defending the product and is still facing more than 19,000 lawsuits in the U.S.

The company is not taking action to stop the sale of this product in other countries. In the European Union, cosmetic products with talc have to include the warning ‘keep powder away from children’s nose and mouth.’

Asbestos is a naturally occurring contaminant found in talc. All forms of asbestos are recognized as human carcinogens including tremolite, anthophyllite, and chrysotile which have all been identified in samples of talc. The use of baby powder has been associated with Mesothelioma and many of the outstanding cases link the use of this product to ovarian cancer.

PPG Meets 2020 Target to Eliminate Lead in Paint Products

In 2016, Perry Gottesfeld, Executive Director of OK International, purchased a share of PPG stock and attended the annual shareholder's meeting in Pittsburgh, PA. At that point we had been engaged with PPG and their subsidiary in Cameroon for more than 5 years to encourage them to reformulate their products and stop making lead paint. At the Q&A portion of the meeting in Pittsburgh, Gottesfeld addressed the CEO and Board of Directors with a plea to protect children and adults from lead poisoning around the world by asking them to agree to eliminate lead paint from their products.

In response, Michael McGarry, CEO, pledged to remove lead from all their products globally by 2020. After the meeting, he approached Gottesfeld and agreed to have his staff follow up on this unexpected but well received commitment.

In January of 2020, Pittsburgh based WESA (the local NPR affiliate) contacted PPG to ask if the company made good on its pledge. The company indicated that they have removed lead from their products as planned. The article is available at:

<https://www.wesa.fm/post/ppg-now-fully-lead-free-what-about-old-paint-chips#stream/0>

PPG and AkzoNobel the second and third largest paint companies in the world are now selling paints in all markets without lead additives. Their competitor and the world's largest paint company, Sherwin-Williams, has consistently refused to stop making lead paint.

OK International Launches Hazardous Cookware Webpage

Occupational Knowledge International initiated an investigation on metal exposure from artisanal aluminum cookware made from scrap metal in Cameroon almost ten years ago. Since then we have worked with partners around the world and Jeffery Weidenhamer, Professor of Chemistry at Ashland University to test similar cookware from more than a dozen countries. In addition to our two publications (see below) summarizing our findings, this work has ignited interest from researchers in several countries who have gone on to independently investigate these hazardous exposures.

These studies have shown that aluminum, lead, cadmium and arsenic are released

at hazardous levels from this type of artisanal cookware with normal cooking. Given how widespread this cookware is used in countries around the world, we believe that this is a major exposure source of lead and other metals. With the growing number of published studies corroborating our findings, we recently launched a new webpage summarizing these efforts. The new web page, with photographs provided by a Photographer in Ghana, can be found at: <http://www.okinternational.org/cookware>

Our research on this topic can be accessed at:

<http://www.okinternational.org/docs/Final%20pb%20pots%20STOTEN%202014.pdf>

and

http://www.okinternational.org/docs/COOKWARE_STOTEN%202016%20Preprint.pdf



Aluminum recycling worker in Ghana. (Photo

courtesy of © 2020 MUNTAKACHASANT / MUNTAKA.COM)

UNEP Removes Greenwashing Lead Battery Recycling "Benchmarking" Tool

UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has been charged with promoting environmentally sound management of used lead batteries. The mandate comes from a resolution that OK International and a number of partner NGOs promoted at the UN Environmental Assembly meeting in 2017. This governing body instructed the agency to assist countries in improving lead battery management practices. In response UNEP had partnered with the lead industry association (ILA) and posted a lead battery recycling "benchmarking" tool on its website for evaluating lead recycling plants. In addition, they hosted a series of webinars on this topic.

After OK International and a group of African NGOs wrote to UNEP in May to outline the shortcomings of this approach, they agreed to take down the document from their website. The "benchmarking" tool as designed would only serve to prop up polluting industries as it contained anti-regulatory language and offered no performance standards. Our letter pointed out that what low and middle-income countries need is guidance on developing the necessary laws and regulations in order to establish an equal playing field for the industry. We noted that most countries lack comprehensive industry-specific regulations to include performance measures for stack emissions, ambient air, occupational exposure levels (airborne and blood lead levels), minimum production capacity for new and existing recycling plants, collection systems and waste disposal.

Growth in "Clean" Power Brings Lead Hazards

Perry Gottesfeld from OK International was featured in this recent article in Undark exploring the impacts of roof top solar power on the demand for lead batteries and implications for managing this growing waste stream. The full article is available at:

<https://undark.org/2020/06/03/india-solar-power-lead/>

In addition, Perry Gottesfeld published a commentary in the Journal Environmental Research on a closely related topic. The article "Health risks from climate fix: The downside of energy storage batteries" explores the growth in both lead storage batteries and lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles. See the full article at:

<http://www.okinternational.org/docs/Climate%20fix%20Gottesfeld%202019.pdf>

Remembering Kirk Smith

Kirk Smith, a Professor of Global Environmental Health in the School of Public Health at the University of California at Berkeley, passed away in June. He was a long-term supporter of Occupational

Knowledge International and appreciated the public health significance of our work around the world. Dr. Smith focused much of his career on bringing attention and scientific rigor to the health effects of indoor air pollution primarily from indoor cooking with solid fuels. He set an example for how one person can start a global movement and impact the health of millions around the world.

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