areas, we recognize the public health threat of dispensing mercury. However, we recommend also that the dangers of mercury be sensitively separated from the social-psychological benefits of spiritualism. In inner-city Hispanic communities, espiritismo is an indigenous source of community socialization and support. Spiritualists frequently represent the first line of extrafamilial mental health intervention. Since botanicas also sell medicinal plants and herbal remedies, they offer some basic health care familiar to the cultures of Latin America. Therefore, public health interventions must be aimed at helping spiritualists find safe alternatives to mercury. □

Luis H. Zayas, PhD
Philip O. Ozuah, MD

The authors are with the Department of Family Medicine, Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore Medical Center, Bronx, NY; Dr Zayas is also with the Graduate School of Social Service, Fordham University, Tarrytown, NY.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Luis H. Zayas, PhD, Graduate School of Social Service, Fordham University, Tarrytown, NY 10591.

References


Blood Lead Levels, Scientific Misconduct, and the Needleman Case

1. A Reply from the Lead Industry

Together, industry, government, and the public health community have made great progress in reducing blood lead levels in this country. It is regrettable that a supposedly peer-reviewed journal with the stature of the American Journal of Public Health would choose to print the ill-conceived and misleading annotation by Ellen Silbergeld on the Herbert Needleman case.

A carefully worded accusation in the opening line of Silbergeld’s article charges that the lead industry somehow misused the National Institute of Health’s Office of Scientific Integrity to attack Dr Needleman. Lead Industries Association, Inc, the trade association for the lead industry, has never contacted the Office of Research Integrity or anyone associated with it with respect to this case. To imply that Lead Industries Association, Inc, or this industry, has “used” the Office of Scientific Integrity has had any influence on the deliberations of that organization is totally false and insults the Office of Scientific Integrity and its successor, the Office of Research Integrity.

The charges against Dr Needleman stemmed from a 1990/91 Environmental Protection Agency court case involving the Sharon Steel Company (not a lead company). The testimony of Dr Needleman, an expert witness for the government in that case, was challenged by expert witnesses Dr Claire Ernhart and Dr Sandra Scarr. The judge ordered Dr Needleman to make available his original data to these scientists in order to substantiate his findings. Dr Needleman, who received government grant money to perform research, previously had refused to reveal these data to the public.

A partial review of Dr Needleman’s data by Drs Ernhart and Scarr apparently suggested enough irregularities to warrant further investigation, and since the research was sponsored by government funds, Drs Ernhart and Scarr filed a complaint with the Office of Scientific Integrity. The Office of Scientific Integrity then requested the University of Pittsburgh to conduct an inquiry.

The final report of that inquiry found “no evidence of deliberate falsification,” as selectively quoted in the Journal article, but did find “a deliberate misrepresentation of procedures.” This part of the finding was omitted from Silbergeld’s article. The report concluded that “Dr Needleman was deliberately misleading in the published accounts of the procedures used in the 1979 study.” The board unanimously recommended that Dr Needleman submit corrective statements to the journals in which his original studies were published and that he make his complete data set available to any investigator. The Office of Research Integrity reiterated these same findings in its oversight report released in March 1994.

The lead industry never attempted to influence the University of Pittsburgh, the Office of Scientific Integrity, or their inquiries, and to imply otherwise is false.

Other implied accusations in the Silbergeld article, such as that the lead industry tried to stifle the truth about lead exposure and lead poisoning, are equally untrue, as evidenced by a careful reading of her text. For example, she states that the industry association’s “greatest triumph” occurred in 1925 when “it overrode opposition to the introduction of tetraethyl lead as a gasoline additive.” However, in the previous sentence she states that the association was founded in 1928, a full 3 years after it supposedly achieved its “greatest triumph.” This obvious error makes us wonder whether your publication gave any sort of critical examination to the Silbergeld article before publishing it.

We are proud of our industry’s outstanding record of encouraging proper use of our product. Lead today is safely used in vehicle batteries, electronic products such as computers and TVs, x-ray shielding, and scores of other applications that benefit society. □

Jerome F. Smith

Requests for reprints should be sent to Jerome F. Smith, Lead Industries Association, Inc, 295 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10017.

Reference


2. The Critics’ Arguments

Dr Ellen Silbergeld portrayed Dr Herbert Needleman as a “courageous man of intellectual integrity” wrongfully