"The Baltimore Experience"

Despite a century of stuggle by heroic doctors, the lead paint scourge continues to strike youngsters in slum housing.

By Jim Haner
Sun Staff
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Among historians - especially those of the activist stripe who seek to spare us from repeating the sad follies of our past- one fo the more pitiable chapters of the 20th century is receiving fresh attention these days

And , yet again, it appears that lessons learned the hard way long ago are being ignored.

The story begins with a mysterious plague that gripped a U.S. city in the early 1900s.

Children were showing up in hospital clinics with inexplicable fevers, vomiting, bleeding from the gums, delirious with pain. some were carried in comatose by weeping mothers.

By 1962, three decades after the city record keeping began, the disease had killed 129 kids, although a great many more = mostly "colored" toddlers = undoubtedly went to their graves uncounted. Of the 773 known survivors, it was often said that some might have been better off dead, as the plague left them profoundly retarded, blind, deaf, unable to wak or talk. As they aged, some went mad and wound up confined to psychiatric hospitals.

The city was Baltimore.

The disease was lead paint poisoning.

Now, more than 50 years after the phrase "The Baltimore Experience" came into popular usage among doctors to describe the horrors that unfolded there, those dark early days of the lead paint plague are taking on new currency. Attorneys in at leas five states are pursuing lawsuits against some of th world's best known paint companies for allegedly ignoring the dangers of lead. And exhibit "A" in their case is Maryland's largest city - the nation's leading laboratory on the toxic effects of leaded paint through the first half of the 20th century.

Few other places in the U.S. contain such a wealth of historic and medical documentation on the disease, and few bear so many scars. For if any city was in a position to save its children, it was Baltimore. And Baltimore did not.

Banned from new paint by the U.S. Congress in 1978, lead had been under nearly constant assault in Baltimore for decades, straight through the end of Mayor Thomas

D'Alesandro Jr.'s administration in 1959. But he was to be the city's last great political crusader against the toxin.

With his passing from office, a 30-year movement to remove the crumbling layers of poison from the walls of Baltimore's slum rowhouses ground to a halt under successive mayors.

Today, more than 1,000 of the city's kids - mostly black and poor - continue to ingest brain-damaging doses of lead paint chips and dust every year. And the vast majority are being poisoned in the same squalid rowhouse neighborhoods that claimed so many lives nearly a century ago.

It is the legacy of decades of indifference by elected officials that stands in stark contrast to the heroic efforts of the city's doctors and renowned medical institutions to stop the scourge.

"We have lived too long and too complacently with our slums. ... They are bad investments, regardless of any money return, and we must fight a civic battle to rid our city of them."

- Dr. Huntington Williams, Baltimore's health commissioner said in 1954

Through their work, the fundamental medical questions about the cause and prevention of the disease were answered long ago. Through their work, lead poisoning might easily have gone the way of such crippling childhood afflictions as polio, tuberculosis and meningitis.

But unlike diseases, lead poisoning does not reap its victims evenly. Carrying no threat of contagion, it strikes mostly at poor children trapped in substandard rental houses built before 1960.

As the 19th and 20th centuries progressed in Baltimore, as one impoverished ethnic group after another moved through the slums above and below North Avenue, this disease of neglect cut them down. At one time or other, the city's Irish, Italian and Greek communities each has had its sad experience with lead poisoning.

But none has borne the brunt as long as the city's African-American population - whose children make up more than four out of five lead poisoning victims today.

It is the deaths and retardation of black children that form the central narrative threads of the "The Baltimore Experience."

It is the story of a city within a city - one white and relatively healthy, the other black and perpetually ill from living in what have always been among the nation's worst slums.

Built or converted almost overnight to house the thousands of European immigrants and freed black slaves who flowed into Baltimore in the Civil War era, the east- and west-side ghettos were monuments to racial segregation and engines of infectious disease.

Unheated, unplumbed, poorly constructed and owned almost entirely by speculator landlords, they were built for quick profit. And they were not built to last.

By the beginning of the 20th century, their occupants were mostly black.

Doctors battle lead

In the annals of epidemiology - the study of diseases and their causes - the desperate struggle of Baltimore's doctors to save the city's children from the ravages of a hidden killer in the slums ranks among the more compelling sagas in American public health.

For decades, Baltimore coroners cracked the skulls of dead infants and peered into their brains, drilled into their lifeless bones and dissected their organs searching for clues about the disease's origin and treatment.

By 1914, Dr. Kenneth D. Blackfan at Johns Hopkins Hospital delivered the breakthrough, identifying the root cause of the convulsions that killed a 5-year-old orphan boy in the Baltimore Home of The Friendless.

His name lost to history, known only as W. M., the child became the first published account of death by lead paint poisoning in the United States.

Within a decade, Blackfan and his colleagues had made the city the nation's primary center of research into the disease. Even then, this much was clear: the culprit was a cheap, durable and highly toxic mineral then commonly found in most household paints - lead.

"In any historical retrospective on lead paint poisoning in America, the doctors from Baltimore emerge as real heroes," says Peter Reich, an assistant professor at Boston University's School of Public Health and author of an influential 1992 monograph for the Environmental Defense Fund entitled "The Hour of Lead."

"If you read the early studies, what you get is this sense of immense hope: that pediatricians were on top of this, that the problem was well recognized, that it was in the hands of some very smart people at no less an institution than Johns Hopkins."

In 1933, a Hopkins graduate named Dr. Huntington Williams ascended to the office of Baltimore health commissioner and was soon making lead poisoning a national cause.

In annual lectures before students at Penn and Yale and Harvard; in urgent letters to his counterparts in Chicago and New York and Philadelphia; in the press and on the radio, Williams warned America of the scourge on its walls.

Barely recognized as a major killer in the rest of the country, lead was well understood by 1951 as a leading cause of death among Baltimore's children, after respiratory diseases - largely through the efforts of Williams and his colleagues at Hopkins.

"You are our beacon [of] light," wrote the chairman of the Yale University Department of Public Health in a 1959 letter to the commissioner, applauding his activism.

'A tireless crusader'

Williams opened the nation's first municipal blood laboratory in Baltimore for handling suspected pediatric lead poisoning samples (1935); made Baltimore the first city in the United States to ban the use of lead paint on interior household surfaces (1954); instituted the first general blood screening program for children (1956); launched the nation's first preemptive housing inspection program to prevent children from being poisoned (1960).

In 1959, he took his fight to the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of Frank vs. Maryland, winning a decision that ratified the power of city health officers to conduct searches of private property suspected of harboring threats to public health.

The case centered on a landlord who refused to let inspectors search his building for rats, but Williams soon employed the high court ruling in his campaign against lead poisoning.

Leading inspectors in a house-to-house survey in the mostly black rental slums of West Baltimore in 1960, the commissioner established that there was a 98 percent probability of finding lead paint in any given dwelling.

He also showed that Baltimore's African-American children - those most likely to be trapped by poverty in the city's toxic slums - were being poisoned at 7.5 times the rate of the city's white population, a disparity that has gotten much worse since then.

"He was truly a tireless crusader," says Elizabeth Fee, chief of the history of medicine division at the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda and author of a comprehensive history of Baltimore's early battle against lead poisoning.

"He committed his life to public service - and, unfortunately, died without seeing his life's work fulfilled. As we all know, children are still being poisoned in Baltimore."

A study by the Community Planning and Housing Association in 1947 found that Baltimore's slums were, even then, among the most horrid in America.

The city had worse incidences of tuberculosis, diphtheria, meningitis, child mortality, rat infestation, dilapidated housing - and more outhouse toilets - than any of the nation's seven largest cities.

All of these plagues and more, Williams conquered in his career through inoculation, extermination, demolition and oratory before city and state officials, stressing the threat to the health of the general population posed by pestilential conditions in the ghetto.

"We have lived too long and too complacently with our slums," Williams declared in 1954, in the midst of a campaign to strong-arm landlords into installing indoor toilets in

56,000 houses. "They are bad investments, regardless of any money return, and we must fight a civic battle to rid our city of them."

With the backing of mayors Howard W. Jackson in the 1930s and 1940s and D'Alesandro in the 1950s, Williams succeeded briefly in making Baltimore a "model city" in early urban renewal - overseeing the razing of huge swaths of rat-infested slum shanties on the city's near west side above Pratt Street.

But even for the indefatigable Williams, lead poisoning proved politically intractable.

The affliction was not contagious, so black children could not spread it to the rest of the city. The well-off and white who lived in properly maintained homes were virtually immune - then and now - as long as parents avoided dangerous renovations that could release lead dust into the air.

The slums persist

More important, slum houses generated millions over the decades for powerful interest groups such as landlords, banks and real estate concerns. And they persistently opposed large-scale repair of the city's wretched rental housing stock as too expensive - then and now.

"We are now trying to get landlords of slum properties to take a more responsible attitude to get the poisonous paint taken off these houses," Williams wrote to a friend shortly before his retirement in 1962 as the longest serving health commissioner in Baltimore history.

In the preceding five years, at least 18 children had died and some 270 had been left with severe brain injuries. By then, black children had come to account for nearly 90 percent of all cases, Health Department records show. Among the fatalities were James Toliver, 2, Dennis Green Jr., 1, and Dietrich Gilmore, 2 - whose sister Diana was also poisoned in the same rental house on Whittier Avenue in 1958.

"The children that are sickest and do not die end up [institutionalized] for the rest of their life as imbeciles at public expense," Williams continued in his letter. "We know of 11 of these and there doubtless are more."

And yet, at the time of his death in 1992, Williams' nemesis - lead poisoning - had survived him. And Baltimore's slums were still among the worst in the country.

As Fee's 1990 paper in the Journal of The History of Medicine and Allied Sciences makes clear, if any city in the U.S. was in a position to spare itself these modern agonies, it was Baltimore.

For decades, Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland Medical School churned out generations of doctors who took their expertise in lead poisoning to health departments around the country and the world.

Some, like the venerable Dr. J. Julian Chisolm Jr., now 79 and retired from the Kennedy Krieger Institute Lead Clinic, and his one-time protege Dr. Ellen K. Silbergeld, passed up opportunities to advance their careers so they could stay in Baltimore.

Testifying before Congress, the National Academy of Sciences and various federal regulatory agencies - including the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention - the Baltimore doctors were instrumental in winning passage of federal laws banning lead from gasoline and paint in the late 1970s.

The bans are widely regarded as among the most significant public health triumphs of the late 20th century.

"These people are ... leading figures in the modern history of public health," observes David Rosner, a historian at Columbia University in New York. "They changed the face of the world, but they have always been underappreciated in their own back yard.

"If only Baltimore knew how good they had it."

Chisolm alone perfected a safe treatment for severely lead poisoned children that has saved the lives of thousands worldwide, and authored some 140 scientific reports and articles during a career that seldom took him far from the east-side slums.

Among these: a groundbreaking study in 1956 that found black children living in East Baltimore were being exposed to lead at levels up to six times higher than industrial workers who handled the toxin for a living.

But like Williams, Chisolm and the other Baltimore doctors made little headway in their own state or city.

They volunteered to serve on lead poisoning advisory panels to Maryland's governors and legislators, only to find themselves outnumbered by landlords, real estate brokers, builders and bankers concerned about the costs of poison control.

Among recent bitter defeats: a recommendation in 1994 that the state require all rental houses to be tested for lead dust - the most common source of poisoning in slum dwellings - was struck from the final version of the state's lead control law two years later.

That law requires landlords to remove or cover flaking lead paint in return for protection from poisoning lawsuits. But without mandatory dust testing to confirm that repairs have been done right, Maryland continues to poison its children at a rate more than 15 times the national average.

For the few who remember the lessons of the past, it is but the most recent chapter in the long, sad history of "The Baltimore Experience."

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