Poisoning for profit: Book exposes US corporate cover-up of toxic pollution

Part 1

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Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution, by Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, University of California Press

The 1999 film *The Insider* exposed the criminal methods of the tobacco industry. The tobacco industry moguls weren't ignorant of the health risks of smoking. They weren't misguided. The health risks of smoking had been well researched and documented—by the industry's own scientists. Through suppression of information, cover-ups, lies and outright gangsterism, these industry heads sought to continue their conspiracy against the public.

Such methods are not the exception for corporate America, they are standard operating procedure. In *Deceit and Denial*, Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner examine in detail how the lead and plastics industries covered up and suppressed the truth about the dangers of poisoning by lead and vinyl chloride monomer (VCM), the base from which polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is produced. The book, well written and engrossing, lays bare the incompatibility between production for profit and public health.

Markowitz is a professor of history at John Jay College and the Graduate Center of City University of New York. Rosner is a professor of history and public health at Columbia University and director of the Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health. The two previously collaborated on a 1994 book, *Deadly Dust: Silicosis and the Politics of Occupational Disease in 20th Century America*, and on other volumes on working conditions in industry.

The two authors had unique access to materials on the inner workings of the two industries they studied. Because of their expertise on occupational health, they were asked to review corporate records of the lead industry and the plastics industry by lawyers working on class action suits on behalf of child victims of lead poisoning and workers harmed by exposure to vinyl chloride in chemical plants. The result is a chronicle of corporate malfeasance, using internal memos, letters, minutes and other corporate and industry documents.

Lead and plastics are not peripheral industries, but played central roles in the expansion of the American economy, in the first and second half of the twentieth century, respectively. Lead was critical to every industry involved in building the infrastructure of modern cities and their suburbs, as well in agriculture and, above all, transportation (through leaded gasoline). Plastics, used in vinyl siding, flooring, tabletops, computers and thousands of other products, became pervasive in American life after World War Two.

The harmful effects of lead have been well known for over 100 years. In the early 1900s, Alice Hamilton, an occupational physician, published studies on the effects of lead in popular magazines and in medical journals such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. In 1910, she pointed out that "the study of the past thirty years has shown that lead enters the body through inhalation and swallowing, not through the skin." Her 1913 report for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics asserted the danger of white lead in paint. White lead is the paint pigment usually made of lead carbonate. It was also known at that time that children's health was especially at risk from lead poisoning.

Outside the US, many countries investigated lead poisoning and recommended the substitution of non-lead pigments that were available. Countries that banned or restricted the use of white lead for paint included France, Belgium and Austria in 1909; Tunisia and Greece in 1922; Czechoslovakia in 1924; Great Britain, Sweden and Belgium in 1926; Poland in 1927; Spain and Yugoslavia in 1931; and Cuba in 1934.

Any restriction on the use of lead was a threat to a major American industry. By the late nineteenth century, the United States was the largest lead-producing country in the world, with mines in Minnesota, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma and Montana. The development of rail transportation meant lead could be shipped by train and barge to manufacturing plants in towns like Pittsburgh, Chicago and Buffalo, where it was refined into consumer goods.

During this period, millions of working class families moved into new single-family homes, where lead was used in pipes, solder for plumbing, appliances, and paint, as well as to seal canned food. The major lead companies, such as the largest, National Lead, owned everything from smelters to factories to paint companies.

As the authors point out, in 1906 National Lead began a 50-year campaign to promote white lead: "Beginning in 1906, with the introduction of the Dutch Boy Painter, the young boy in workman's cap, clogs, and overalls with a paintbrush in his hand, as its advertising symbol, National Lead linked lead, whiteness, healthfulness, prosperity, and purity with its 'pure white lead'

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product." Lead was advertised as healthful, pure and benign, with ads urging parents to use the paint for children's rooms because it was bright, clean and "helps to guard your health."

There soon came to be another use for lead. In the early 1920s, Ford dominated the auto industry with its Model A and Model T, cars that were nearly indestructible. General Motors (GM), on the verge of bankruptcy, decided to try to compete through a new marketing strategy. It offered more powerful cars whose styling and features changed annually. And with its interlocking directorate relationship with the DuPont Company and the petrochemical industry, GM looked for a fuel it could patent and profit from. Tetraethyl lead was developed by Thomas Midgley, Jr. in 1922 at the General Motors Research Laboratory in Dayton, Ohio, as an additive for gasoline. Ethyl became the brand name for leaded gas, and in 1924 GM and DuPont created the Ethyl Gasoline Corporation to produce and market it. By 1927, the race of changing styles and increasing power was on.

Scientists warned that the production of tetraethyl lead could seriously jeopardize public health. The response of the surgeon general at the time, H.S. Cummings, was to ask Pierre S. DuPont, GM's board chairman, about the safety of Ethyl. In response, Thomas Midgley himself reassured Cummings that GM and DuPont were confident of Ethyl's harmlessness.

As the authors demonstrate, industry repeatedly used a series of well-developed techniques to ward off criticisms of dangerous products and to increase their market among consumers. This included making sure that research supported company claims of safe products. In the case of tetraethyl lead, DuPont and GM paid for an investigation by the US Bureau of Mines at government facilities. The bureau had often done testing as a service to the mining and metal industries. The bureau agreed to GM's demands: it did not allow its scientists to give out the usual progress reports, and it used the brand name Ethyl instead of "lead" even in internal correspondence because it was afraid of popular sentiment against lead.

The agreement between the Bureau of Mines and GM, DuPont, and the Ethyl Gasoline Corporation in June 1924 gave GM control over the research reports, stipulating that "'all manuscripts, before publication, will be submitted to the Company for comment, criticism, and *approval* (emphasis added).'"

As the bureau research on lead continued, 40 of the 49 workers at Standard Oil's Bayway labs in Elizabeth, New Jersey, were severely poisoned. During five days in October 1924, five workers died and 35 others showed severe neurological symptoms of lead poisoning from what everyone at the plant called "insanity gas." The poisoned workers were taken from the plant in straitjackets, hallucinating, convulsing and screaming.

Nonetheless, the industry set out to convince the public that lead was not a threat to the public health. Rather, poisonings by industrial products could be confined and perhaps solved within the factory. Industry defined the problem as an occupational health issue for the workforce, not a threat to the general public.

The day after the fifth worker died, the Bureau of Mines released its preliminary findings exonerating tetraethyl lead. The *New York Times* headlined the story, "No Peril to Public Seen in Ethyl Gas/Bureau of Mines Reports after Long Experiments with Motor Exhausts/More Deaths Unlikely."

Dr. Emery Hayhurst, of the Ohio Department of Health, became a key figure in convincing the public lead was not a danger, writing an unsigned editorial in the *American Journal of Public Health* that lead was completely safe. The public knew him as a respected and independent industrial hygienist. What the public didn't know was that at the same time he was advising labor organizations on industrial hygiene, he was working for the Ethyl Corporation as a consultant.

At the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Professor of Physiology Robert Kehoe promulgated a view that is heard commonly today about PCBs and other chemicals. Kehoe ran Kettering Laboratories, which was funded by Ethyl and the major auto producers and controlled the research on tetraethyl lead. It was normal, Kehoe stated, for certain amounts of lead to be in all human beings; it was a natural ingredient in the human environment; and people had natural mechanisms for eliminating it. To show this, Kehoe experimented on 16 of his employees, feeding them measured amounts of lead or subjecting them to lead fumes. The human experiments continued from 1937 until 1971.

Another big part of the Ethyl Corporation's public relations campaign was to frame the discussion as one between those for progress and those against it. In a three-pronged argument, Ethyl claimed that leaded gasoline was essential to industrial progress and civilization, that along with innovation comes risks, and that the poisonings in the plants happened because the workers did not follow instructions and were careless. In addition, tetraethyl lead was "an apparent gift of God," in the opinion of the first vice president of Ethyl.

Continuing technical advances were made in the auto industry, and the catalytic converter was invented in the late 1960s. The catalytic converter reduced pollution by converting carbon monoxide into carbon dioxide and water. Use of the catalytic converter created a rift between the auto industry and the Ethyl Corporation because it was incompatible with leaded gas.

By the 1970s, the known dangers of lead in gasoline had led to reduced use but not a ban. It wasn't until the end of 1995 that the Clean Air Act and corresponding EPA regulations finally prohibited leaded gasoline as a motor vehicle fuel.

To be continued

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