

Flint pre-screening of the documentary *MisLEAD: America's Secret Epidemic*

Parents fighting lead poisoning denounce government inaction and lies

Tim Rivers

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Mothers of families affected by lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, spoke from the stage at the Flint Institute of Arts last week after a special preview screening of the unfinished documentary *MisLEAD: America's Secret Epidemic*. The film details the epidemic caused by pervasive use of the heavy metal from coast to coast.

As they struggled to find out what was wrong with their children, the women quietly described being humiliated and lied to by local, state and federal officials who repeatedly denied the situation had any relation to the change in the source of their drinking water to the Flint River. Recent information has come to light to suggest that state officials were motivated by powerful financial interests who were seeking the bankruptcy of Detroit to make decisions that both precipitated and prolonged the vast poisoning.

Film director Tamara Rubin, whose children were poisoned by paint dust 11 years ago, introduced the film and led the discussion afterward.

The film begins by explaining that the deadly consequences of lead exposure have been known by the industry for more than a century. In 1904, in Australia, a major study demonstrated that lead causes convulsions, comas, and death. Records in the United States exposing the deadly effects of the substance date from 1914. The industry responded with a massive marketing campaign promoting lead paint, especially in the presence of children. Ads for Dutch Boy, Glidden and Sherwin Williams showed how easy it was to wipe a child's handprints from walls painted with lead.

"I am 42 years old," Ms. Rubin narrates on screen. "Lead was banned when I was 9 years old. It crosses racial barriers. And there are no medical treatments. Any lead in the blood of children causes permanent brain damage.

"There is lead in children's toys, fishing leads, toy soldiers," the narration continues. Some of the most moving scenes depict the anger and frustration of her son AJ trying to fasten a zipper or do simple tasks for school. "This is what brain damage looks like," she explains.

The scene moves from Maine to New Orleans and from New York to Portland, Oregon. "A school principal in Rochester, New York, discovered that 100 percent of the children in the school's program for special education were lead poisoned. 'I was horrified,' he said. 'It is not a learning disability. It is a brain injury.'"

It raises blood pressure and causes kidney damage and early cognitive decline.

The conclusion of her decade-long struggle is especially devastating

in the context of the crisis in Flint. "The major government agencies have been deceiving us about this problem. We have allowed the industry to dictate the conditions of public health."

Haven McWilliams lives in low-cost housing with two young children and spoke from the panel. "Two weeks after my son's second birthday, he had a blood lead level of 56 µg/dl," she said. "At the time they said that 10 parts µg/dl was okay. Now they say 5 µg/dl is okay. He was in the hospital for a week."

The film repeatedly emphasized that any amount of lead will cause brain damage in children.

"We lived in an old middle school that had been renovated into apartments," Haven continued. "They divided the classrooms, but they didn't change the windows. There was lead in the windowsills. When they did a scan of my son's body, his entire digestive tract lit up like a Christmas tree."

She went on to say, "I have a six-week-old daughter. When they came to do remediation [removal of contaminants], they only did our apartment. But there are little kids throughout the building. Now my son has a blood lead level of 16 µg/dl. He has a problem with impulse control. It took months and months to get a special education plan for him."

Ed Wenz is an expert in lead abatement and lead risk assessment. He trains contractors and lead risk assessors for the state of Michigan. "My son has lead poisoning," he said. "All this time, you are just trying to figure out how to help your kid live through it. You can't research what is happening to you.

"I am staggered when I hear these levels of 24,000 parts per billion [(ppb)—measure of lead in water]. That is a level which is deadly poison for anybody. Only trace amounts of lead will cause permanent brain damage in children.

"The problem here goes back to the government. The facts were kept from us for so long. That is what made it so bad. We need to fix this problem and right now. And there is a risk that nothing will be done."

Flint mother LeeAnn Walters was instrumental in bringing lead-in-water expert Dr. Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech to study the city's water. "When my family was exposed," she said, "It affected the children differently. One of my sons has gained only 3.5 pounds in the last year. He will be five years old in March and weighs only 35.8 pounds.

"His twin brother weighs 53 pounds. He is having behavioral issues.

We don't know what is in store for our families. I have dedicated the last two years fighting for this.

"What is happening here is happening in other cities. The proposed changes to the lead and copper rule will weaken an already broken system.

"The level of lead in my water was 13,200 ppb. I was being told I had to pay for poison. Then they wanted me to sign a contract to give up my rights. They said that by not signing it I was putting my kids at risk. Ours is not the only family. People are suffering from skin rashes, hair loss; and we don't know what internal damage they have."

"My daughter turned 16 yesterday," reported Keri Webber. "When she had a bone scan at the age of 15 because of a car accident, five doctors pulled me into a room and began questioning me. It started to get ugly. They were saying, 'What have you done? What have you exposed her to? There are lead lines in every growth plate in her body.'

"We couldn't understand it. We had not changed schools. We had not moved. The only thing I could think of was that they had changed the water source. But they said, 'Oh, no. That can't be it.'

"Then on August 3, my husband said he was going blind in one eye. His blood pressure was 290/190. He had ruptured an artery behind his right eye. Then we found out that elevated blood pressure is a product of lead poisoning.

"My other daughter is 13. The lead level in her blood was 280 µg/dl. Her liver enzymes were rated at 1283, which is equivalent to the final stages of liver failure. Then in September, they finally broke the news that there is lead in the water.

"My lead level is 3.4 µg/dl, my daughter's is 3.7. The most common symptom of lead poisoning among adults is uncontrolled high blood pressure. Finally, we now know where it has come from. All the while, the doctors in Ann Arbor were telling us to drink more water.

"My husband Mike drinks a huge amount of water.

"Two weeks before Christmas, my daughter's liver enzymes were so off the charts that there is no way that it could be attributed to Mono [mononucleosis]. They started liver treatments. She will need something huge in the future.

"This whole situation could have been prevented. My husband is still a walking heart attack. His blood pressure is 190 over 125.

"The guilt is real. We were telling our children to take a shower. Keep clean. We just didn't know. We have to help everybody. That is the reason that we agreed to come forward."

Film director Tamara Rubin plans to bring a film crew back to Flint to record the crisis here to complete the movie in the near future. "It has been 10 years since my kids were poisoned," she said. "What has happened here is really disturbing to me."

She continued by emphasizing the stark contrast between the results of widely known scientific studies and the criminal character of what passes for government oversight, regulation and prevention. "The natural level of lead in blood for humans is 0.016 µg/dl as measured in the teeth of humans living before the domination of industry," she said.

"If you have a blood lead level of 3.2 or 3.4 micrograms per deciliter, you have lead poisoning.

"My son AJ had a blood level of 4 µg/dl," she explained. "He was in severe pain all the time with gastro-intestinal tract distress. AJ now has massive dental decay. The highest he ever tested was 4 µg/dl. I want you all to understand this. The lower lead levels are proportionally much more damaging to children. There is no such

thing as a safe level of lead in blood.

"Lead in the blood has a half-life of 30 days. The CDC says that only children between the age of one and five get poisoned. That is not true. The health department for the State of Michigan does not answer my phone calls. This problem affects everyone and everything, and they refuse to answer."

Ed Wenz trains lead risk assessors and lead abatement contractors for the State of Michigan. He told us afterward that he was staggered by the comments of the mothers who spoke at the film. (See separate interview.) "The legal limit of lead in water is 14 ppb, or 10, or 5," he said. "They keep changing it. But tens of thousands of ppb. That is like drinking deadly poison.

"Because of the high acidity in the river water and the extra chlorine that was added to it, all the calcification and iron that was lining the pipes and preventing lead from leaching into the water was stripped away. It will take 15 years to build up that protective layer.

"A 12-inch water main had built up calcification that reduced it down to 8 inches. Now that layer has been stripped away, So the pipe has lost its structural integrity. Who is going to fix the water main breaks? We need a new water delivery system.

"When the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality said that we do not have a problem with lead in the water in Flint. That was not a true statement."

Before and after the screening, audience members took copies of the WWSW newsletter on the Flint water crisis and spoke with our reporters. Okola Nicholson, a mother who lives in North Flint, said, "It's really everybody's issue. The city has been in existence for 100 years. We know the infrastructure is going to wear out. Why haven't they looked back at the infrastructure and prepared for the future. We cannot live on bottled water.

"They chose to overlook the issue of lead in the water. If you can't pay, they cut you off. Our school was built 60 years ago. Yet there are no new water fountains."

At one time, the city was the center of production for General Motors, the largest and richest corporation on the planet. Infrastructure, schools and living standards were among the best in the country. "I was born and raised in Flint," she added. "I know the difference between what it was then and what it is today."

For more than three decades, the corporation, with the willing collusion of the United Auto Workers union, has taken massive tax abatements from city revenues while closing and demolishing one factory after another. Auto employment has fallen from 80,000 jobs to just over 5,000.



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