Several lines of evidence have suggested that δ-aminolevulinic acid (ALA) is the neuropathological correlate of lead poisoning. In vitro studies have shown the neurotoxicity of ALA. Clinical manifestations of lead poisoning closely resemble those of the acute neurological attacks in the hepatic porphyrias, during which the levels of ALA and porphobilinogen are significantly increased. The role of ALA accumulation in lead poisoning is supported by the report that asymptomatic heterozygotes for the ALAD deficient porphyrinas are prone to acute lead poisoning when exposed to low levels of lead. Lead is known to inhibit ALAD which results in the build up of ALA, detectable in the plasma and urine at blood lead levels less than 10 μg/dl. Aminolevulinic acid resembles γ-aminobutyric acid receptors in the nervous system; this is thought to be one of the primary mechanisms of lead induced neurotoxicity. 

Bellinger et al studied 79 subjects (aged 19 or 20 years) using a battery of neuropsychological tests. Sixty seven of the subjects had ALAD1-1 phenotypes, while five had ALAD1-2. On “nearly every endpoint” of the neuropsychological test, the five individuals with the ALAD2 phenotype had better scores compared to 67 subjects with ALAD1, even after adjustment for dentin lead levels. Our subjects with ALAD1-2/ALAD2 genotypes also did significantly better in one of the neurobehavioural tests compared to subjects with ALAD1-1 genotype.

In summary, workers with ALAD1-1 genotypes have significantly higher ALAU and had significantly poorer neurobehavioural scores involving motor dexterity (GPP) compared with workers with ALAD1-2/2-2 genotypes. The ALAD2 allele may exert certain protective measures against the neurotoxic effects of lead as shown by lower ALAU levels among workers with the ALAD2 allele. This hypothesis is preliminary given the small sample size of the group with ALAD1-2/2-2 genotypes. Further study involving a larger cohort of workers with ALAD2 allele would be needed to confirm this.
Confused about particles? Read this book!

The past 15 years have seen an explosion in interest in and concerns about the effects of ambient particles on health. Huge sums have been spent on research and journals are dominated by papers ranging from cutting edge epidemiology to molecular biology. Something for everybody—certainly—and no solution yet in sight.

Robert Phalen has tried to bring order to the field by producing a short book setting out what is known, what is unknown, and what are the lessons that should have been learnt. The factual content will be familiar to those in the field though many who comment on the field would do well to read this book closely. More important than the review of what we know are the author’s critiques of ill-founded inferences allegedly based on the evidence. The reader is stimulated by this and should recall: evidence is not proof, and hypotheses are not facts. Because the topic is important and because reducing levels of pollutants is becoming expensive and may involve actions that may affect health negatively, we need to be exacting in our requirements for proof of effects and proof of benefits. But how does all this fit in with the Precautionary Principle? This is not discussed and is a lapse on the part of the author. It may be that the US-centric approach that the author has adopted is responsible. European (including UK) thinking about the Precautionary Principle is developing rapidly though this cannot be discussed here.

The author asks important questions about low dose effects, hormesis, and the overall costs and benefits of lowering levels of particles. Many will find areas for disagreement: all should be stimulated!

At £43.00 for a small book, this is not a cheap read but it is important.

R L Maynard

Dioxins and health, 2nd edition

Edited by Arnold Schecter and Thomas A Gasiewicz (pp 952, £96.95), 2003, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. ISBN 0 471 43355 1

The second edition of this book is published seven years after the first, in which time the science of dioxins and related compounds has moved on (related compounds are those whose action also appears to be mediated via binding to a cellular protein called the Ah receptor). The book reflects the progress in the field, with several new chapters on the Ah receptor, and a marked emphasis on new information on the molecular biology of dioxins in the updates of existing chapters. These cover all relevant areas of toxicology and epidemiology, as well as sources, distribution, and risk assessment.

It is important to note that this is not a textbook. It is a collection of chapters written by some of the leading researchers in the field and it reflects the detailed knowledge that these individuals have in their own areas. For example, the chapter on the immunotoxicology of dioxins opens with a clear introductory text on the basics of the immune system but progresses quickly to a discussion of complex immunology and virus infection models. The target audience which, according to the editors, includes ‘well-educated and intelligent lay persons’ will struggle with much of this. However, other chapters are more readable. There are good and extensive reviews of the animal carcinogenicity and reproductive toxicity data on dioxins. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on reproductive epidemiology which had a good summary and where the authors had assessed the data against the Bradford-Hill criteria to test the strength of evidence for effects of dioxins on the human reproductive system. Of particular interest to the general reader might be the chapter on the Seveso accident of 1976, which has been revised to include a discussion of the result of the 20 year mortality study on the exposed population.

The book has few other problems. It is repetitive with several chapters overlapping in content. In places it is not up-to-date. For example, the discussion of risk assessment in the overview lacks any mention of the key 2001 risk assessments by the WHO Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) and the European Union’s Scientific Committee for Food (SCF) which were both based on the developmental effects of dioxin rather than its carcinogenicity, the basis of earlier risk assessments. Nevertheless, it fills a gap in the market and would be a valuable source for a biomedical professional interested in learning more about these fascinating chemicals.