Contamination of houses by workers occupationally exposed in a lead-zinc-copper mine and impact on blood lead concentrations in the families

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Abstract

Objective—To evaluate the pathway of leaded dust from a lead-zinc-copper mine to houses of employees, and the impact on blood lead concentrations (PbB) of children.

Methods—High precision lead isotope and lead concentration data were obtained on venous blood and environmental samples (vacuum cleaner dust, interior dustfall accumulation, water, paint) for eight children of six employees (and the employees) from a lead-zinc-copper mine. These data were compared with results for 11 children from occupationally unexposed control families living in the same city.

Results—The median (range) concentrations of lead in vacuum cleaner dust was 470 (21-1300) ppm. In the houses of the mine employees, vacuum cleaner dust contained varying higher proportions of mine lead than did airborne particulate matter measured as dustfall accumulated over a three month period. The median (range) concentrations of lead in soil were 30 (5-407) ppm and these showed no evidence of any mine lead. Lead in blood of the mine employees varied from 7 to 25 μg/dl and was generally dominated by mine lead (>60%). The mean (SD) PbB in the children of the mine employees was 5.7 (1.7) μg/dl compared with 4.1 (1.4) μg/dl for the control children (P = 0.02). The PbB of all children was always <10 μg/dl, the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council goal for all Australians. Some of the control children had higher PbB than the children of mine employees, probably from exposure to leaded paint as soil of the eight houses of the control children were >50 years old. In five of the eight children of mine employees >20% of PbB was from the lead mine. However, in the other three cases of children of mine employees, their PbB was from sources other than mine lead (paint, petrol, background sources).

Conclusions—Houses of employees from a lead mine can be contaminated by mine lead even if they are not situated in the same place as the mine. Delineation of the mine to house pathway indicates that lead is probably transported into the houses on the clothes, shoes, hair, skin, and in some cases, motor vehicles of the workers. In one case, dust shaken from clothes of a mine employee contained 3000 ppm lead which was 100% mine lead. The variable contamination of the houses was not expected given the precautions taken by mine employees to minimise transportation of lead into their houses. Although five out of the eight children of mine employees had >20% mine lead in their blood, in no case did the PbB of a child exceed the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council goal of 10 μg/dl. In fact, some children in the control families had higher PbB than children of mine employees. In two cases, this was attributed to a pica habit for paint. The PbB in the children of mine employees and controls was independent of the source of lead. The low PbB in the children of mine employees may reflect the relatively low solubility (bioavailability) of the mine dust in 0.1 M hydrochloric acid (<40%), behaviour—for example, limited mouthing activity—or diet.

Keywords: lead; mine; blood; adults; children

Toxic materials, such as lead, taken home from a parent’s place of work is a primary pathway which can result in contamination of the household and possibly increased blood lead concentration (PbB) in children.1-10 In the current study, mine employees lived in a rural town of 23 000 inhabitants located about 40 km from the (Woodlawn) mine.

The Woodlawn mine was discovered in the late 1960s and its main ore minerals are pyrite (FeS2), sphalerite (ZnS), galena (PbS), and chalcocite (CuFeS2). In the year ending June 1995, 0.59 million tonnes of ore were mined that contained on average 1.5% Cu, 3.7% Pb, and 10.9% Zn.11 The ore was originally dug from an open pit but is now mined underground. Dust containing lead is generated during all the operations of ore extraction both in the open pit and underground. The ore is pretreated in situ (grinding and concentration) and this generates additional amounts of fine-grained dust containing lead as well as the fine material in the tailings dam, the residue after removal of the bulk of the sulphides.

Previous attempts to establish sources and pathways of lead in blood used indirect means of correlations between PbB and environmental variables. A more direct evaluation can be made with high precision lead isotope measurements such as those carried out in the Broken Hill lead mining community12,13 where the main
potential source of lead, the ore body, is more obvious.

All the workers in this study insisted that they took every precaution to limit the amount of lead brought home—such as showering at the mine, wearing street clothes before and after work, taking work clothes to a commercial laundry or to their home in a sealed plastic bag, and in some cases, going to work by company bus. The aims of this study were to find whether contamination of the houses was still possible under these apparently stringent condi-

**Methods**

**SUBJECTS AND EXPOSURE**

The study was conducted on two main groups. The first was the mine group, which comprised six employees from the mine and their families. The employees were from the mill and workshop areas and also underground workers. Their houses were built after 1970, the approximate time at which lead was removed from domestic paint in Australia. One of the mine families (family 1) moved soon after the beginning of our study from a newer to an older house with lead paint.

The second group comprised eight families who had no contact with the mine or its employees. This group was the control or background group, even though six families lived in old houses with lead paint. One child from family 4 was monitored because of the concern over her pica habit (putting fingers and objects in the mouth) for paint. The family moved three months before the beginning of our study, from one old house with lead paint to another old house with lead paint.

**SAMPLING**

Figure 1 shows the location of the sampled houses and Table 1 shows personal details. For the mine families, venous blood samples from all family members, when possible, and environmental samples were collected and analysed. For four control families, vacuum cleaner dusts and blood samples from the children were collected and analysed. Only blood samples were analysed from the other four control families.

In the cases in which families changed houses during the course of this study, environmental samples were collected from both dwellings (families 1, 4, and 6).

Sampling was carried out with previously established protocols. 12, 13

**Table 1 Summary of environmental and personal information about the investigated houses and families**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>House age and condition</th>
<th>Family members</th>
<th>Father’s occupation</th>
<th>Children analysed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sex</td>
<td>age (y)</td>
<td>sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine group:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Old: exterior Pb paint</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>25 y</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Goitre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt; 2 y</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20 y</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>15 y</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>20 y</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Electrician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>&lt; 3 y</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control group:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Old: interior Pb paint</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Baker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Electrician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Old: interior Pb paint</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Old</td>
<td>4a</td>
<td></td>
<td>Minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>&gt; 100 y</td>
<td>5a</td>
<td></td>
<td>Manual labourer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Old</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paint eater:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>90 y: interior Pb paint</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>100 y: interior Pb paint</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1a, 4a, 6a denote current residence; 1, 4, 6 denote previous residence.
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Soils
Soils were sampled with a hand corer and samples were placed into separate clean plastic tubes. Random sampling of the topmost 3 cm was performed from different parts of the house yards, with special emphasis on where children spent most of their time.

Vacuum cleaner dusts
Vacuum cleaner dusts were initially collected from the owners’ vacuum cleaner into a clean plastic bag. Because of concern about contamination due to previous vacuuming especially as some owners vacuumed their vehicles which had occasionally, or frequently, been driven to the mine, samples were also collected with a different vacuum cleaner with new disposable bags. Bags were changed after every sampling and the vacuum cleaner was cleaned after each use.

Petri dishes
To obtain additional information on interior dust, the dust fall accumulation or lead loading was measured with the petri dish approach. Two precleaned polycarbonate petri dishes (85 mm diameter) were placed in separate rooms in each house. The location and the height of the petri dishes were registered. The dishes were left in place for periods ranging from three to 7-5 months.

Paint
Paint flakes were collected with a scraper and placed into clean plastic bags; the presence of lead was identified by a chemical spot test.

Water
Water was collected directly from the tap, after running it for 30 s, into a 125 ml precleaned polyethylene bottle. In the case of family 5, the water was collected from a bench top water filtering system.

Blood
Blood samples were collected by a trained paediatrician (KMacD) at the Goulburn Base Hospital in the presence of the parents. An anaesthetic cream (EMLA cream 5%) was applied to the child’s arm one hour before taking the blood. Analysis of the cream showed it to have about 1 ppb Pb and a 206Pb/207Pb ratio of about 16-27. The cream was washed off the arm with soap and then the arm was washed with clean water. A 2-3 ml blood sample was placed into a precleaned, preweighed teflon vessel without anticoagulant. Random samples of needles and syringes had been previously tested and found to contain negligible amounts of lead.

Approval for blood sampling was obtained from the parents.

ANALYTICAL TECHNIQUES

Soils and vacuum cleaner dust
The whole sample was sieved through nylon sieves into three separate fractions: > 250 μm, 250 ≥ 75 μm, and < 75 μm. The < 75 μm fraction was used for the analysis. In two cases, the 250 ≥ 75 μm was analysed as a control. Before the digestion of 30–60 mg sample in a 1:1 mixture of ultrapure 7 M HCl and 7 M HNO3, for two hours, a 46% pure 206Pb solution (spike) of known isotopic composition and lead concentration was added to the unknown sample to enable the lead concentration to be measured at the same time as the isotopic composition. Lead was separated by anion exchange chromatography in the form of a bromide and then further purified by anodic electrodereposition.

Petri dish dust
Except for two families, the petri dish dusts from the two rooms were combined after acid extraction. The petri dish and lid were covered by a thin film of 7 M HNO3, for about 15 minutes. The solution was transferred into a teflon beaker, 206Pb spike was added and evaporated to dryness. Lead was separated by anion exchange chromatography in the form of a bromide.

Water
About 50 ml water with a 206Pb spike was evaporated under a clean nitrogen flow and lead in the form of a bromide was separated by anion exchange chromatography.

Blood
About 2 g blood sample with a 202Pb spike was digested in 16 M HNO3 on a hot plate in a sealed teflon beaker. After digestion, the sample was evaporated under a clean nitrogen flow and lead in the form of a bromide was separated by anion exchange chromatography.

The purified lead was loaded onto a single rhenium-filament with the well established silica gel technique and analysed for lead isotopic compositions and lead concentrations on a solid source thermal ionisation mass spectrometer (VG ISOMASS 54E) run in fully automatic mode. Isotopic ratios measured were 206Pb/207Pb, 208Pb/206Pb, and 209Pb/206Pb. Data have been normalised to the accepted values of the international standard National Bureau of Standards SRM 981, by applying a correction factor of +0.08% per unit mass. Precision estimates, based on over 1800 analyses of international standards and replicate analyses of natural samples are 0-1% (2σ) for the 202Pb/207Pb ratio and 0-05% for the 206Pb/207Pb and 208Pb/206Pb ratios.

Total blank contamination was around 100 pg for blood and water samples and 800 pg for soil and dust samples. As the blanks contributed a negligible amount to the lead in the sample, no blank corrections to the data have been made.

LEAD ISOTOPE METHOD
The lead isotope technique makes use of the four isotopes of lead. Three are the stable end products of radioactive decay of uranium and thorium: 238U to 206Pb, 235U to 205Pb, and 232Th to 208Pb. The fourth, 207Pb, is not a product of radioactive decay and its abundance has been essentially constant since the earth formed. This isotope is commonly used as a reference isotope. Because three isotopes of lead are pro-
duced by radioactive decay, their amounts (abundances) have changed over geological time according to radioactive decay laws and this is reflected in the geological source (age) of the lead. The abundances are usually expressed as ratios that lead from the geologically old (about 1700 million years old) lead-zinc-silver deposit of Broken Hill in New South Wales (Australia) has an abundance ratio of $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ of 16:0 whereas the same ratio is 18:1–18:3 for geologically younger deposits (500–400 million years old) on the same continent.15 These isotopic differences are used to evaluate the source of lead in the environment, humans, and animals. Interpretations of lead isotopic data may not be straightforward because lead in the environment or animals may be a mixture of lead from different sources (mines). Hence, lead that is introduced to the body from soil, dust, air, food, or water is largely dependent on the source of lead present in the environment, which in turn is dependent on the age and isotopic composition of the rocks and ores from which the lead in the environment is derived.

In assessing the proportion of PbB from a lead source such as the Woodlawn mine with the lead isotope fingerprint method, knowledge of the background isotopic ratio in blood of the non-exposed population is required. Assuming that the background isotopic composition for exposed people would be the same as that for non-exposed people, any isotopic shift registered from this background value towards the isotopic composition of the suspected source can be used to measure the contribution of that source to the PbB of a person. Isotopic shifts in the opposite direction indicate the existence of a different source.

In estimating contributions to PbB from the lead in the mine, the dietary contribution is assumed to be negligible, being incorporated into the background control blood values.

Diagrammatic presentation of the isotopic data is usually as a plot of one isotopic ratio versus another—for example, $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ versus $^{207}\text{Pb}/^{206}\text{Pb}$ or as an isotopic ratio versus $1/\text{Pb}$ concentration. If only two sources are the contributors to the lead burden of a particular sample (two component mixing), the isotopic data will lie on a linear trend between the two end members on an isotopic plot of—-for example, $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ vs $^{207}\text{Pb}/^{206}\text{Pb}$. For three contributing sources with different isotopic ratios, the isotopic data for the sample are constrained to lie within a triangle on the same type of plot. In the case of an isotopic ratio versus $1/\text{Pb}$ plot, two component mixing shows well defined linear trends.16 Usually the number of sources is limited to two or three on the basis of environmental observations.

### Results

Table 1 shows personal plus environmental information for the subjects. Table 2 shows a summary of the data obtained on the environmental samples of each family and the contributions from the different sources resulting from our calculations. Figures 2–6 show representative isotopic plots (detailed data on iso-

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**Table 2** Summary of the proportions of lead from different sources in the environmental samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Pb (ppm)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Soil (back yard)</th>
<th>Pb (ppm)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Vacuum cleaner dust</th>
<th>Pb (ppm)</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Petri dish dust</th>
<th>Pb load μg/m²/dl</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Water Pb (ppb)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>53 petrol</td>
<td>955</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>91 mine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>43 petrol</td>
<td>70 mine</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>46 petrol</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>100 mine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>83 mine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>74 mine</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>940</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>94 mine</td>
<td>7-3 (TV)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>48 petrol</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>88 mine</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>76 petrol</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paint eaters:</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>170 petrol</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>70 petrol</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

bg = Background; TV = TV room; br = bedroom; 1a, 4a, 6a denote current residence; 1, 4, 6 denote previous residence.
Contamination of houses by workers occupationally exposed in a lead-zinc-copper mine and impact on blood lead concentrations in the families

![Graph showing isotopic ratios for soils, vacuum cleaner dusts, and petri dish dusts.](image)

Figure 3: $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ vs. $^{208}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ for soils, vacuum cleaner dusts, and petri dish dusts showing that in both cases household dusts are aligned between petrol lead and mine lead. Lead in these soils is a mixture of natural lead and petrol lead.

- Topes and concentrations may be obtained from the corresponding author.

**POTENTIAL SOURCES OF LEAD**

As there is no lead industry in the town, the potential main sources of lead are from soils, petrol, and the mine possibly brought into the house by the mine employees, paint, and diet (including water).

**Soils**

Naturally occurring concentrations of lead in soils are a potential source in a rural town like that under consideration. Lead concentrations and isotopic compositions can be estimated from analyses in this study and from data on rocks published by Gulson. There is a fairly consistent cluster of isotopic data for soils sampled away from the centre of the town with a low ratio of $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{208}\text{Pb}$ (about 2:11) and variable $^{207}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ ratios (0.8457–0.8583).

**Mine**

Lead from the mine can be transported to the houses on clothes or vehicles or both. The isotopic compositions of the ores and rocks from the mine are well documented.

**Petrol**

Petrol sold in the study area is supplied by Sydney refineries. The isotopic composition of petrol lead has been calculated from the average of 40 petrol samples collected from the Sydney metropolitan area at intervals covering the time of this study.

**Paint**

Paint lead was found in three houses and analysed for isotopic composition and lead concentration. The isotopic compositions of the paints analysed were similar and indicate that they were derived from a geologically old source such as from the Broken Hill mines ($^{206}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ about 16:0). Paints from the control houses have not been analysed and may have more complex isotopic compositions than found in Sydney houses.

**Diet**

No dietary analyses were undertaken in this study. However, previous studies with quarterly market basket surveys from three major Australian cities and ongoing quarterly six-day duplicate diet surveys in Sydney and Brisbane involving 54 samples (unpublished data) showed that the mean Pb concentration was 5:4 (2:5) μg/kg and $^{206}\text{Pb}/^{204}\text{Pb}$ was 17:4 (0:25) (range 16:9 to 18:0). Lead in water is usually a mixture of natural lead leached from the rocks and sediments with which it has been in contact and lead from the plumbing system. The plumbing contribution is usually overwhelmingly dominant compared with the natural contribution. The lead used in Australian plumbing systems is usually derived mainly from the Broken Hill mines with some lead from other geologically younger sources.

**SOLUBILITY OF MINE DUST**

To obtain an estimate of the solubility of the mine dust, if ingested for example by a child, two samples of particles sized 100 μm from the workshop area were subjected to leaching by 0:1 M HCl at 38°C for two hours.

**ESTIMATION OF BACKGROUND VALUES OF CONTROL BLOOD**

As mentioned earlier, with the lead isotope fingerprint method, assessing the proportion of PbB from a lead source such as the Woodlawn mine requires knowledge of the background isotopic ratio in blood of the non-exposed population. We have analysed blood from 10 children from control families, living in old and new houses. The blood samples of the...
The background isotopic ratios and PbB have been defined more precisely with a simple statistical analysis described in the appendix. The background values so calculated are 17.16 (0.03) for the $^{206}\text{Pb}^{204}\text{Pb}$ and 4.1 (1.4) $\mu$g/dl for PbB. The background value of 4.1 $\mu$g/dl that we have calculated for the 10 control children is about half the (geometric) mean value of 7 $\mu$g/dl measured in 718 children aged nine months to five years from Sydney.20

**ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES**

**Soils**

The median (range) lead concentration for soils from the houses of the mine employees was 30 (5–407) ppm. Soils with the lowest lead concentration, from family 3, were considered to be a minimal source of PbB because of their very low lead concentrations (5–7 ppm) and their location in a rural area. The data for soil samples were aligned between petrol lead and natural soil lead (fig 3) indicating a contribution from both sources. This hypothesis that two components were mixed is supported by the good correlation of $R = 0.92$ for the soil data on a plot of $^{206}\text{Pb}^{204}\text{Pb} \div \text{PbB}$ (not shown).

However, in houses with exterior or interior lead paint (back yard soil of family 1 (second house) and front yard soil of family 4), the presence of particles of lead paint in the soils around the houses was suspected on the basis of isotopic ratios and lead concentrations. Rare paint flakes were confirmed by microscopical inspection of the samples.

There was no evidence in the isotopic composition of the town soils to indicate any long distance airborne transport of lead dust from the mine, or lead dust inadvertently deposited onto soils by employees from their clothes and vehicles.

**Vacuum cleaner dusts**

Figure 4 shows that the vacuum cleaner dusts from the houses of mine employees had a median (range) lead concentration of 470 (21–1300) ppm. Isotopic ratios of these vacuum cleaner dusts showed that from 40% to 100% are mine lead (table 2). The results for vacuum dusts collected with the homeowners’ own cleaners showed higher contributions of mine lead, especially in the cases where the owners had vacuumed their vehicles, which were often driven around the mine (family 5).

The isotopic ratios of $^{206}\text{Pb}^{204}\text{Pb} \div \text{PbB}$ for the vacuum cleaner dusts were aligned between petrol lead and mine lead (fig 3). There seems to be little or no lead from the soils to the vacuum cleaner dust. The relatively high lead concentrations and low $^{206}\text{Pb}^{204}\text{Pb}$ ratios in the vacuum cleaner dust of family 1 (a mine family) could be related to fragments of lead paint; $^{206}\text{Pb}^{204}\text{Pb}$ ratios in the analysed paints ranged from 16.02 to 16.49.

Vacuum cleaner dust from the control families had similar isotopic compositions with the overwhelmingly dominant contribution from petrol or lead paint (fig 4).
Petri dish dusts

Only petri dish dusts from the houses of the mine employees were measured. Isotopic data for the petri dish dusts were also aligned between petrol lead and mine lead (fig 3). The lead loading (or lead flux) in the petri dish dusts was variable ranging from very low values of 9 µg/m²/30 days, up to 849 µg/m²/30 days. These values compare with mean values of 86 (56) µg/m²/30 days (n = 164) measured in urban environments such as Sydney and Brisbane (unpublished data).

Between 40% and 90% of lead in the petri dish dusts was from the mine (table 2). However, the petri dish dusts showed a preferential accumulation of petrol lead compared with the vacuum cleaner dusts from the same houses indicated by the higher 206Pb/204Pb ratios in the petri dish dusts. The larger petrol contribution in the petri dish dusts is possibly related to the finer grain size and lower density of the petrol lead compounds compared with galena from the mine.

The dust shaken from the clothing of one household employee had an isotopic composition characteristic of the mine lead and a lead concentration of 3000 ppm.

Solubility of mine dust

Two samples of particles of dust sized 100 µm from the workshop contained 2.36% and 1.10% Pb. The lead soluble in 0.1 M HCl was about 40% and 30%, respectively, and was relatively low compared with that measured in dusts from Broken Hill and from urban areas.21

Waters

All the water samples had very low concentrations of lead, about 1 ppb and isotopic ratios which indicated an uptake of lead mainly from the householder's plumbing systems. These lead concentrations would be a negligible contribution to PbB.

Discussion

BLOOD SAMPLES

Blood samples in children

The mean PbB for the 10 control children of 4.1 (1.3) µg/dl was significantly different from the mean PbB of 5.9 (1.8) µg/dl (P = 0.02) for the children of mine employees. None of the children in this study had concentrations of PbB > 10 µg/dl, the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council goal for all Australians.22

For five of the eight children of mine employees, between 21% and 50% of PbB was from mine lead (fig 5, table 3). In this group of five children, the highest proportion of mine lead (about 50%) and the highest PbB (> 6.3 µg/dl) were found in the two children of family 5. Dust from their vacuum cleaner had the highest proportion of mine lead (94%) and the highest concentrations of lead (1300 ppm).

The other three children of mine employees (families 1, 2, and 3, table 3) had a minimal proportion of mine lead in their blood and yet two of the three had the highest PbB of any children. Hence, there was no systematic relation between PbB and percentage of mine lead.

Three of the children in the control families had higher PbB concentrations than children of the mine employees. The PbB in the child from family 4 was 8.9 µg/dl and was attributed to a pica habit for paint.

Blood samples in the mine employees

The fathers employed at the Woodlawn mine all had high proportions of lead from the mine in their blood samples, ranging from 47% to 86% (fig 5). The employee with the smallest percentage of mine lead in the blood had the lowest PbB (6.7 µg/dl) among the mine employees. The largest proportion of 86% was for the man in family 5 whose family home showed the highest degree of contamination of mine lead and his children had the highest percentage of mine lead in their PbB.

Although based on limited data, a positive correlation (R = 0.91) was found between PbB and an increased ratio of 206Pb/204Pb in the blood samples of mine employees and their children (not shown). The line of best fit to the data for the blood samples of mine employees and their children intercepted the isotopic ratio axis at a value of 18.06, the same as the mine lead (fig 5). This is strong evidence that the source of increased PbB in these people is related to the mine lead introduced to their houses. However, for three children of mine employees the PbB came from other sources such as petrol and background lead and there was no contribution from mine lead. This finding reinforces the concern that generalisations in attributing lead sources to the PbB of community members can be misleading and that each case has to be assessed individually.

In summary, this study has shown that houses of employees from a lead mine can be variably contaminated by mine lead even if they are not situated in the same place as the mine. This indicates that lead is probably transported into the houses on the clothes,
shoes, hair, skin, and in some cases, motor vehicles, of the workers. Other pathways—such as, through shoes, hair, skin, and motor vehicles—were not evaluated in this study but remain obvious routes to the houses. Contamination of the houses was not expected given the precautions taken by mine employees to minimise the lead transported into their homes. These precautions include showering at the mine site, wearing street clothes and shoes after work, carrying their work clothes in plastic bags which are usually left in the garage or in the laundry room (some take them directly to a commercial laundry). Moreover, most employees go to work on a bus provided by the mining company. Despite high concentrations of dust in some houses, none of the children had PbB which exceeded the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council national goal of 10 μg/dL. In fact, some children in the control families had higher PbB than children of mine employees, which in two cases, was attributed to a pica habit for paint.

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Appendix: Statistical estimation of background values

We have defined more precisely the background isotopic ratios and PbB with a simple statistical analysis of the background subjects, in which the background population has been identified according to two requirements, the largest number of samples with similar isotopic ratios, and the lowest average PbB.

Figure 6 shows the frequency of blood sampling of the background children with 207Pb/206Pb ratios in a fixed range. The chosen interval was of 0-1 units. The frequency distribution displays a peak (n = 4) corresponding to the 207Pb/206Pb isotopic interval 17.1-17.2 and frequency values decreasing on both sides of this.

The four samples in this range give an mean (SD) isotopic ratio of 17.1 (0.3). The PbB increases on both sides of the minimum value and corresponds to the isotopic composition 17.0-17.1. The highest frequency unit (207Pb/206Pb ratios in the range 17.1-17.2) has the second lowest PbB (3.6 (1.5) μg/dL), which is reasonably close to the lowest PbB value of the adjacent unit (3.0 μg/dL based on only one sample). Hence, the 17.1-17.2 unit is the one which better satisfies simultaneously the two requirements of the background isotopic compositions and the background PbB. With the average isotopic ratio of this unit (207Pb/206Pb = 17.16) as a background value, we have calculated the background PbB of the samples with higher 207Pb/206Pb ratios assuming that their isotopic shifts are uniquely due to contamination with Woodlawn mine lead (207Pb/206Pb = 18.1). We have obtained a mean (SD) PbB of 3.8 (1.6) μg/dL which is in good agreement with the mean PbB of the four samples that define the background group (3.6 (1.5) μg/dL). This supports the choice that we made of the background isotopic ratios and PbB. A similar recalculated background PbB was also obtained for samples with isotopic compositions shifted in the direction of the petrol lead, which was assumed to be a source of contamination.