



Idaho Nurses Association – Greener Idaho Topic June 2009

“Runs Better Unleaded”: Theme from the Idaho Public Education Campaign on Preventing Lead Exposures in Children

Contributed by Ingrid Brudenell, RN, PhD; INA District 31 Delegate; Member, Division of Medicaid, Lead Screening Advisory Committee

Lead poisoning is a serious and preventable environmental exposure that adversely affects an individual’s health and development, as well as entire communities and regions. There is no safe blood lead level in children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). At the April, Idaho Nurses Association (INA) House of Delegates meeting, delegates passed a resolution to promote better health in individuals, families and environments through screening of eligible children and adults, monitoring lead levels, as well as environmental remediation to limit exposures. INA members are asked to collaborate with other disciplines and to advocate for lead level screening in eligible children and pregnant women. Currently, both the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare services (CMS), Head Start, and Early Head Start require blood lead level screening for eligible children enrolled in their programs. Unfortunately, screening is not being done with all eligible children and many parents are not advised or aware of the importance of screening for lead exposure. Additionally, many Idaho health care providers are not testing for lead exposure, may not be informed about current research regarding the effects of lead, or don’t have the resources needed to test lead levels.

The Idaho Lead Screening Advisory Committee (Division of Medicaid, Medical Care Unit) monitors and seeks to increase the percentage of screening for eligible children enrolled in Medicaid. In 2008, approximately 319 children ages 5 years and under received a blood lead test out of approximately 9,488 Medicaid eligible children in Ada county. These numbers represent a screening rate of 3.4%. Lead environmental exposures are increased by living in older homes with lead based paint or plumbing, older homes undergoing renovation, communities with mining residues, and industries using lead such as cement factories. Individuals may be more susceptible if they are anemic and have poor nutrition. Children are developmentally susceptible during the prenatal period, infancy and childhood. Lead has been identified in a number of household items such as toys, which resulted in massive recalls by Fisher- Price and other toy manufacturers. The Division of Medicaid has initiated a number of steps to increase lead screening of children enrolled in Medicaid including public education through PSAs, providing parent education and information, increasing availability of testing equipment and health care provider education. These efforts will only be successful if all eligible children and pregnant women are given an opportunity for testing, monitoring and medical intervention if required. A list of providers who have the equipment to test for lead levels is available on the Medicaid web site.

Individual health care actions are needed to increase screening and monitoring but they are not sufficient to reduce lead exposures. It is essential to decrease lead exposures in the environment and population using government policies and regulation as tools. The screening and protection of the public from lead has many levels of government oversight. For example, The State Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) assess and monitor remediation of the environment and housing. Housing remains a primary source of exposures especially for children living in poverty, or attending schools or receiving childcare in poorly maintained buildings. At the national level the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) initiates policy and funding for lead exposure prevention, remediation and monitoring. These agencies each have a website with information about programs, policies, scientific reports and contact information. Coordination between and among agencies is important to optimize the level of public, private, business and government interaction for effective lead reduction. Two successful policy changes are the removal of lead from both gasoline and household paints. These policies have been a successful collaboration between levels of government, private industry and consumer groups which have dramatically reduced exposures in the United States. However, exposures still continue in many places around the world. More can be done to reduce environmental exposures, screen and monitor lead levels and development in children, pregnant women and treat affected individuals through all levels of prevention.

The Idaho Nurses Association resolution for lead screening and monitoring challenges nurses to become better informed and collaborate with others to promote individual testing and environmental reduction of lead levels. Disparities of lead exposures, education, screening, remediation to reduce exposures is an environmental social justice issue which nurses can address. Several strategies can be used by nurses to reduce these disparities:

- **First**, educate nurses and other health care providers that more needs to be done to screen and monitor eligible children and pregnant women. Assess what is known, why screening is not done and what are the barriers for screening from the providers' view. Is testing linked to the specific medical home of the child and family? Do nurse practitioners, physician assistants and physicians screen for lead exposures as part of well child examinations?
- **Second**, assess parents understanding and fears about blood lead level screening, use of questionnaires and observations to assess risk factors and safety of the home, child care and school environments. Find out what parents need to know and how they would like to be informed to make the decision to have their children tested. Fear of blood testing can be addressed and methods used to reduce pain and anxiety of children and parents at testing can be presented.
- **Third**, publicize the actions that the public and industry can take to reduce lead exposures and toxicity. Provide recognition for actions taken to reduce exposures. For many low income families, remediation for lead reduction in housing and child care environments is a problem. The Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides some resources.
- **Fourth**, use social marketing for public service announcements, programs, fliers, posters, art contests and family activities to learn about lead. All materials need to be prepared for the non-English speaking public and be easily read or illustrated. Public education may make a difference in screening and reduction of exposures. Other

initiatives which are needed include developing an accurate prevalence study of blood lead levels in Idaho children and continued efforts to increase screening of children enrolled through the Medicaid and Head Start, Early Head Start programs.

INA's resolution is a call to action for nurses in the state to increase protection of children and adults from lead exposures.

Resources and Links:

- 1) Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, Care Line, 1-800-926-2588, <http://www.idahochild.org> scroll to "Get the lead out"
- 2) Environmental Protection Agency <http://www.epa.gov/r10earth/lead.htm>
Center for Disease Control Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program
<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead>
- 3) U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Office of Healthy Homes and Lead Hazard control. <http://www.hud.gov/offices/lead>
- 4) <http://www.medunit.dhw.idaho.gov>