Experts press NHMRC on toxic lead levels

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THE pressure is on the national health regulator to redefine the level at which children are considered to have too much toxic lead in their blood.

Yesterday, national and international experts agreed levels set by the National Health and Medical Research Council were too high and urged it to follow the lead of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which last month dropped its "level of concern" from 10 microgram per decilitre to 5ug/dL.

The call came from delegates to this week's Eliminating Childhood Lead Toxicity in Australia forum, convened at Sydney's Macquarie University by environmental scientist Mark Taylor. It is a key plank of a three-step program to end childhood exposure to environment lead and other toxic metals, particularly in mining and smelting communities such as Mt Isa in Queensland and South Australia's Port Pirie.

Public health physician Bruce Lanphear, with Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, urged the NHMRC to revise its guidelines. "The CDC finally acknowledged, about five years too late, that there's no safe level of lead," he said.

Taylor presented new data at the forum, showing that over half the youngsters in Mt Isa would have blood lead levels above the NHMRC guideline if it dropped it to 5ug/dL.

He didn't have such data for Port Pirie. But, as reported last month in Weekend Health, a news analysis by SA Health shows that in the first quarter of 2012, nearly 32 per cent of children in Port Pirie had blood lead levels of 10ug/dL or more.

The concern stems from growing scientific evidence that blood lead levels of 5mddL put children at risk of intellectual deficits, school failure and behavioural problems such as delinquency and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Further, as childhood exposure to lead dust causes permanent damage to regions of the brain governing mood regulation, executive control and judgment, recent epidemiological findings that such exposure is linked to adult violent assault are not surprising.

While the NHMRC has noted the CDC action, posting a statement on its website, a spokesman said he couldn't comment on the matter as it's under review by the NHMRC's lead working committee.

The statement says the committee will report to the NHMRC "later in 2012". Weekend Health understands it may report within weeks.

Speaking of the forum's consensus statement, Taylor asks regulators to consider their own children or young relatives.

"Would a blood lead level of 10ug/dL as a goal be acceptable for them? If not, then it should not be acceptable for any child. This is because all children represent the future of society."

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