

FROM GENEVA

Lead Hazard Discounted

Despite the feared "chemical contamination of man's environment" the levels of lead, arsenic and other heavy metals in human blood and urine have not risen in 30 years, probably universally, a preliminary study sponsored by the World Health Organization has revealed.

What's more, some New Guinea mountain tribesmen have more lead in their systems than anyone except some Finns, Yugoslavs and Englishmen, the investigators found.

The UN medical agency in Geneva says it launched the study "in response to public concern about the effects of poisonous substances in the environment," and in a search for "normal values" in the body, "baselines" in people who have had no occupational, therapeutic or other exposure.

(A major concern over lead contamination was sparked two years ago by a California geochemist who found evidence that levels of lead in the human environment were rising at a startling rate. The disclosure sparked widespread alarm, legislative proposals in the last Congress, and a major U.S. Public Health Service program of research into lead contamination and lead tolerances. Regulation of the lead additives in gasoline, for instance, was and still is under serious consideration in some quarters.)

The researchers were led by Dr. Leonard J. Goldwater, professor, School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York. The International Academy of Legal and Social Medicine was represented. Dr. Goldwater's laboratory served as the reference laboratory and 14 others in as many countries collected samples and air-shipped them. From 600 to 1,000 blood and urine specimens were available for each heavy metal studied.

For lead, mean values were highest in Finland and lowest in Lima, Peru. City dwellers had a bit more than rural folk.

The New Guinea specimens demonstrated the "ubiquity of lead."

Comparisons with studies in individual countries over 30 years showed "remarkable agreement" in the ranges and means for lead concentrations.

"These studies are but the beginning of a larger effort to evaluate the extent to which humans may be absorbing metallic elements. We need a base line with which to compare future observations," the team reported.

"Such factual data may serve to limit sensational speculative notions on the

amount of toxic metals ingested by man in urban and industrial communities, and they may be valuable in epidemiological investigations." *D.A.E.*

FROM AUSTRALIA

Policy on Uranium

The Federal Government has moved to conserve uranium resources for Australia's own future atomic energy requirements. Besides restricting exports, it also plans to encourage exploration to locate further uranium deposits.

David Fairbairn, minister for National Development, has concluded: "The time is approaching when State power authorities need to give serious consideration to the introduction of nuclear power stations in Australia."

"The Federal Government has an important responsibility to safeguard the national interest by endeavoring to ensure that sufficient uranium would be available for essential needs including the nation's power requirements."

"Known uranium resources are not adequate to support even a very modest nuclear power program," he says.



Australian News and Information Bureau

Treating uranium ore in Rum Jungle.

In the future, companies will be able to export uranium only under conditions that would take account of the size of the uranium ore deposits and the date of their discovery. Under new regulations, approval to export any portion of the uranium deposits exceeding 2,000 short tons of recoverable uranium oxide proved before Jan. 1, 1967 would depend on the discovery of new economically recoverable reserves or uranium oxide equal to the quantities for which permission to export was sought.

(This means that some companies, if they wish to maintain their export figures, now will have actively to search for new uranium deposits to satisfy the Government's new policy, or have their operations curtailed.)

The Australian Atomic Energy Commission finds that South Australia, because of its high fuel costs, offers the best prospect for the early introduction of nuclear power.

It is expected that atomic power stations will be built in Victoria, Tasmania and New South Wales in the early 1970s. This means Australia is now on the verge of developing its own nuclear program.

It is understood the Government has no intention of re-introducing the big tax-free cash rewards it once offered for uranium discoveries, as there is not the same urgency as there was in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

At the end of World War II the urgent need for uranium was stimulated by the demands of the Western Powers for atom and hydrogen bombs.

But the Government has announced that newly found deposits of uranium will not revert to the Government. They will be developed by private companies. Already four overseas companies have expressed interest in developing new-found uranium deposits. *W. A. Scholes*

FROM INDIA

Victims of Varnish

More than 200 persons have died from drinking varnish in Madras, in southern India. But instead of giving up prohibition, the Government has decided to enforce its dry policy more strictly. Madras, like many other Indian localities, is dry.

The Government of Madras has ordered immediate seizure of all spirit preparations in the entire state, and immediate suspension of the sale of varnish as a temporary measure pending chemical examination.

This is not the first time that the poorer citizens of Madras have drunk a varnish preparation as an intoxicant, but nothing ever happened on a mass scale before. The varnish drink was prepared by dissolving salt in water and adding varnish containing alcohol to give it intoxicating properties. The solution was poured gently without disturbing the sediment, then mixed with soda or carbonated water before it was consumed.

Twenty-four hours after drinking the preparation, the varnish drinkers suffered nausea and vomiting, accompanied by a sudden decrease in blood pressure and respiratory failure. Loss of eyesight and heart failure also occurred. Paralysis of the vital nerve center is indicated.

A lethal dose of methyl alcohol, an ingredient not lawfully used in the preparation of varnish, has been found in blood, urine, cerebro-spinal and other body fluids taken from the victims, Dr. A. R. Natarajan, chief medical examiner of the Madras Government reported. *K. S. Nayar*