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GOVT VILIFICATION OF PAINT FOR LEAD POISONING IS 'MISLEADING', SAPMA CLAIMS

The Government's persistent vilification of the coatings industry as the arch villain in producing poisonous leaded substances is misleading and overlooks other sources that have historically boosted lead levels in the environment without restraint.

This is the view of Deryck Spence, executive director of the SA Paint Manufacturing Association (SAPMA), who in a hard-hitting statement, says that SAPMA has had enough of being made the scapegoat for lead poisoning dangers in South Africa.

"During the last century large amounts of lead was put into the environment by the use of lead in petrol which has now been reduced with the use of lead-free fuels. Most of the impetus to remove the lead has come because of smog in larger cities and not because of the lead content pushed into the atmosphere.

To reduce emissions of undesirable pollutants, platinum elements in the exhaust systems of motor vehicles became mandatory in certain cities, but these elements are destroyed by lead in the fuel - hence the need to reduce lead.

"The danger lies in the fact that in emphasising the one aspect, the greater danger is ignored. More recently a broader view than those of the metropolitan areas has been taken i.e. air pollution, the use of lead in petrol has been seriously addressed and levels reduced.

The first use of lead in petrol was used in the mid-1920s and only vague calculations can be made as to how

the food chain. It is also interesting to note that lead was abolished by the government in South Africa as late as 2006.

"It should also be remembered that the lead content in the soil, particularly in the Gauteng area where gold mining and uranium extraction have been prevalent for decades, exacerbates the issue even further.

"So the government's attempts to draw the attention away from this by placing all the blame on paint production is counter-productive. The presence of lead in our environment is not going to go away and so the medical profession now needs to tackle the real issues by finding ways of minimising the effects.

The damage has been done and the need to minimise the effects on the most susceptible - the children - must now become the priority. Legislation can do nothing to reduce the current lead in the environment no matter where it came from; it would be closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

"However, this does not justify the presence of lead in our environment and the continued need to eliminate it. The coatings industry is determined to eliminate the use of lead completely - even in the production of Road Marking Paint whose specification (containing high levels of lead) is prescribed, no less, by an SABS-recommended formulation: SABS 731-2001

"Through the auspices of the SAPMA Technical Committee, which draws its membership from the largest

eliminate lead from all paints, including industrial paints. This means that the SABS will have to reformulate its Road Marking Paint specifications - with lead no longer allowed in the formula. Lead had provided such paint with properties for fast drying, colour and longevity."

Spence said it was also important to consider paint sales volumes to show how the government was over-reacting in its vilification of the coatings industry for lead poisoning.

"In 2013, total paint sales in SA was 280 million litres of which 80% was decorative paint sold to the consumer market for the decoration of homes etc. This amounts to 224 million litres of paint of decorative paint - but, and this is important, only 3% was enamel paint, representing 7 million litres of paint.

Furthermore, 85% of the enamel paint manufactured was white - and white paint contains no lead. So, ultimately, in 2013 only 0.42% of South African paint could have contained illegal levels of lead.

"Lead pigments are only used in the formulation of the rich prime enamel colours such as red, orange, yellow, green etc. which reduces the probable percentage even further. Moreover, SAPMA membership - representing 90% of product manufactured in South Africa - specify in its Code of Conduct that members cannot use lead in their paint.

So, the probable lead levels in South Africa's paint are minimal - despite the government's constant proclamation that paint is the major contributor to