Preventing lead poisoning in children: can the US experience inform other countries?

The case of Poland

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SUMMARY

Exposure to excess lead during childhood is preventable, but nowhere has that goal been achieved. In the US, recommendations for prevention of childhood lead poisoning are issued by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, based on periodically updated population-based data on the prevalence of lead poisoning by age and blood lead level. A well developed public health infrastructure is to provide case management to the lead exposed children. In Poland, the social and economic transitions of the last decade changed the potential for childhood lead exposure, and there has been a profound restructuring of the health care system. Blood lead testing in children is performed outside the primary care. Data on blood lead levels are not collected and analysed centrally. The range of follow-up services may differ among the regions, depending on the local expertise. An updated approach to prevention of childhood lead poisoning, making better use of the existing expertise and involving primary care providers, needs consideration.
Complex public health programs like this of lead poisoning prevention cannot be transplanted whole to other countries. However, experiences gained by the US might provide valuable suggestions for others, even though the US policy has flaws and is not fully implemented. Discussing proposal for Poland in light of the current US practice highlights the necessity of reliable estimates of the exposed population for rational policy. It also helps to define research questions relevant to public health practice in Poland, and confirms that prevention of lead poisoning in children requires the coordinated work of different professionals.

Key words: children, lead poisoning, prevention, screening.

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