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Liz: as persistent as lead - Snapshot of Elizabeth O'Brien's lead campaign 3 years into the campaign

By Noela Whitton, a freelance journalist who has written for the New York Times, who interviewed Elizabeth O'Brien at the Community Lead Information Centre in her home in inner Sydney in November 1993.

(This article, written in 1993, has never been previously published)

Andy Warhol said everyone is entitled to fifteen minutes of fame.

Elizabeth O'Brien has been spinning out her entitlement in thirty second grabs on TV and radio since 1991.

And she plans to keep appearing till 2031, if that's how long it takes,

warning of the dangers of lead poisoning,

advising parents and educating the community on lead abatement, convincing governments of the need for proactive leadership, and

challenging industry (oil refiners and other manufacturers who use lead), to consider all environmental, health and economic aspects of the problem.

This interview was arranged for a Monday, when her youngest son is at Day Care – so she can take phone calls, attend meetings, etc,- and the two older boys are usually at school. Her eight year old met me at the door, explaining this was a “pupil free day”, so he and his five year old brother were at home. I arrived in the middle of a discussion about pocket money, and mister five year old, who'd lost some of his that week for a misdemeanour, said, with surprising wisdom, as he pocketed the balance. “My mother works for the whole world and she doesn't even get any money.”

Elizabeth O'Brien, Lobbyist and National Coordinator of the Lead Education and Abatement Design Group, a recently incorporated entity, known as The LEAD Group, Inc., works up to 18 hours a day, often six days a week, from her own house, which is also the headquarters of The Community Lead Information Centre (CLIC). The office manager, David, comes in four or five days every week and works non-stop, *and he doesn't get any money either*. The collective expertise of The LEAD Group's Technical Advisory Board is also provided on a voluntary basis. Likewise, the Committee, the Working Groups, part-time volunteers, and colleagues from other environmental groups.

In 1990 a biographical note on E. O'Brien might have read: B.Sc (Uni of Syd), keen botanist, singer, artist, bush-walker, former teacher, married, mother of two, post-graduate degrees in Health Education, author of one children's book, (with material for dozens more in hand), plans to complete a Masters and perhaps a PhD.

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**Photo: Elizabeth O'Brien and 3 ½ yr old son Harrison (16/4/1994).
Photographer: Steven Siewert / FAIRFAXPHOTOS.COM.**

Then along came Harry (photo at left). Real name Harrison, a blonde cherub with big blue eyes, whom Elizabeth calls a "truly joyous little person." When Elizabeth was pregnant with Harry, she and her husband had started looking for a larger house. The one they wanted just happened to be adjacent to a lead flashings foundry.

"We thought it might be wise to have the soil tested." She said.

"Analysis of 3 soil samples revealed that dirt from the lawn contained nearly 20 times the Environmental Protection Authority's maximum recommended level of lead in soil for domestic premises. We decided not to buy the house, and asked the EPA what they intended to do about the lead contaminated site, and the possibility that the foundry was causing the pollution. The EPA, having no funds, asked the owners of the foundry to pay for the investigation.

"Seven months later, after having moved to an adjacent suburb, and while at a nursing mothers' meeting, I met the woman who was just about to move into the contaminated premises with her family. Was I responsible for telling her not to let the baby play in the dangerously contaminated dirt? Just in case the EPA took too long in responding to my letter asking them this, I told her myself.

"Then, for the fifth time, I asked the EPA for the results of soil tests commissioned by the lead foundry owners. The results were inconclusive. The cause of the lead contamination in the area could have been peeling paint or paint which had been sandblasted or scraped off walls and allowed to settle in the gardens. The fallout from leaded petrol was also a possible contributing factor as well as leaking underground leaded petrol tanks.

"The EPA, having no power to do anything else, advised us that blood testing for lead levels in the children's blood was the essential next step. I hesitated for two months before

subjecting my baby to the trauma of a blood test. We had, after all, moved a kilometre away from the foundry. I finally succumbed because, a week before his first birthday, I saw some dirt on Harry's chin when he came in from the garden.

"The results were devastating. Harry, whose result was included along with 100 other children in a Central & South Sydney pilot study, had the second highest blood lead level of all, a reading of 31 µg/dL (micrograms per decilitre) – the highest was 33. At that time the accepted maximum 'safe' level in Australia was 25 µg/dL, and in the USA in 1991, the goal had been reduced to 10 µg/dL."

Take another look at Harry and try not to think of the neurotoxins (nerve poisons) coursing through his veins. Ask yourself if your child, or your grandchild, is at risk? The South Australian Health Department estimates that as many as half a million Australian pre-schoolers have too much lead in their blood, that is, more than 10 µg/dL.

"Because of Harry's dangerously high level, we were offered free advice from a wonderful lead-knowledgeable paediatrician called Dr Garth Alperstein, an environmental survey of our property, and a unique offer of isotope studies by Professor Brian Gulson to determine the source of the lead. Friends whose children had lower levels than Harry's, opted for moving away from the inner city at once."

"Why didn't you?"

"Since we'd moved so recently, we had no resources to move again. I've often regretted not moving. On the other hand I know I would've regretted not taking this opportunity to help so many people, and begin my work for the environment. And the damage had already been done to Harry.

"With the nurturing of lawn and new topsoil, throwing out the carpets and replacing them with cork tiles, placing wet towels as mats at front and back doors, constant cleaning of floors and washing of linen, and strict hygiene, Harry's blood lead level dropped over the next six months to 15.7 µg/dL. Zero is the only 'safe' level, so we had a long way to go.

"We still don't know if the original reading of 31 µg/dL was an acute short term level, or an enduring level for Harry. Or how much effect his lead exposure would have on his IQ, his hearing development, his stature, his vitamin D metabolism, his memory, speed of reflexes, attention span, etc. No one had all the answers and these questions were being asked by hundreds of concerned parents, so I thought I had better find out for myself."

And find out for herself she did. The office, formerly their large sunny bedroom, includes a comprehensive library on lead, and the students who use it claim there is nothing to match it in their universities.

Collecting information was only the first step. A strategy had to be planned, In November 1991 the fledgling LEAD Group organised the first meeting between representatives of the environment protection and health departments, local government, lead industry and the local community.

"At the meeting I handed out a list of a few hundred questions about lead, for which, at that time, we had very few answers. All the stakeholders were there. If we were clever there would be minimum buckpassing and maximum cooperation."

"You'd had experience as a lobbyist?"

"Certainly not. I knew nothing about politics. Nothing. Not even the names of health ministers, or leaders of environmental groups. I was so naïve, I believed my insistence in dealing only in facts would give me an advantage. I attacked the problem as I would any other, writing down everything I needed to know, continuously, daily. I kept lists of all informants. I started a library, and coordinated the best experts across a range of fields. These people are now our twelve-person Technical Advisory Board. We still need a petrol refining expert to join the team. Can he hear my cry for help?

"In March 1992 our public meeting at the Ashfield Town Hall was televised on the ABC's *The 7.30 Report*. This ensured that a local blood lead level survey we had lobbied for, went ahead."

"Was that your first connection with the media?"

"No. I began at the local level. Zdenka Vaughan at *The Glebe and Western Weekly* was the first reporter I worked with. And my contacts at *The Age*, *The Australian*, *TV news*, *ABC Radio*, and *The 7.30 Report* are wonderful. We couldn't function without them. After talking with Ray Martin on *The Midday Show* our membership increase was most gratifying.

"By July 1992 we'd worked out our aims and objectives, the structure of the organisation and the proposed strategy for achieving the objectives. As a coordinator, I always try to convince the person who has the good idea to follow through with it. I also keep a list of the good ideas.

"It was about this time we realised that simply to raise the level of community concern about lead was not enough. We had a duty to provide others with the kind of information that had helped us to find out our children's blood lead levels and to reduce them. This was the beginning of our telephone counselling service, our parent information nights, and talks to community groups. We now take calls from all over Australia.

"Herbert Needleman, American toxicologist and the world's foremost lead researcher whose work shows the link between lead and IQ loss, and behaviour, and kidney and brain damage, etc., says 'If a government puts its mind to eliminating lead poisoning it would take ten years.' So in 1992, we formulated a ten year plan."

"Most media emphasis seems to have been on leaded petrol?"

"Yes. We decided to focus media attention on one aspect only i.e., the urgent need to phase out leaded petrol. A date for this should be set with the utmost urgency. We have had one great success. We've managed to convince the government to lower the acceptable blood level from 25 µg/dL to 10 µg/dL".

"I've heard of a number of people who have moved house entirely due to the efforts of The LEAD Group? Do you have any figures on this?"

"No precise number, but I know the majority of parents whose children had a blood lead level above 20 µg/dL, and a large number whose children were around 15 µg/dL, have moved house. We know of one case where the family moved after a reading just above 7 µg/dL."

"When do you do your own housework?"

"Usually between putting the children to bed and 11pm. Then I often work till 3 or 4am, in the office."

"Do you ever wake up in the morning and think: I can't go on like this?"

"Never. The job has to be done."

"What does your husband think of the hours you work?"

"He feels as strongly as I do that this is a totally worthwhile undertaking. The fact I am not contributing one cent to the family finances, and that he is underwriting the whole exercise, does not give either of us any joy. I couldn't give my life to a cause like this without his support. And the boys are wonderful, too. They call me a toxic crusader."

"Recent news of the education programme on lead abatement to begin in February 1993, must give you some joy."

"Of course. That's another success. The information support for such a programme is already here at our Lead Information Centre. In fact, we could easily move to a public Lead Information Centre, with government funding, since we are running the existing programme on members' fees and voluntary labour. I could go to work, like other people do, and bring home a pay cheque...."

"Have you had any corporate sponsorship? Any help from the companies who did the damage in the first place?"

"No. In parts of the United States paint and petrol companies are taxed and revenue goes to cleaning up the damage. But we've had one donation of \$5,000 from the NRMA, a photocopier from Canon, a fax machine from Xerox and some smaller donations and corporate subscriptions. Otherwise we depend on our members' fees."

"Where does your membership come from?"

"A wide range of people. First, parents who need initial advice and counselling often join, and subscribe to our *LEAD Action News* newsletter; and a second group, who do not need our advice, aware that their fees will bring help to those who can't afford the \$30 membership fee. However, we don't refuse anyone who phones for help. You can't measure everything in terms of money, of course. Advice from people like Theresa Gordon, Herbert Beauchamp, Dr Kate Short, Dr Chloë Mason and Naomi Segal and the professionals on our Advisory Board like Professors Chris Winder and Geoffrey Duggin, is of incalculable value. Without them we could not function."

I looked at this young woman across the table, as though seeing her for the first time, amazed at her courage and determination. While we talked Elizabeth had taken seven phone calls, attended the children, emptied and refilled the dryer, fixed morning tea, put on a load of washing, and resumed mid-sentence every time.

She had four meetings that week, she said, but that's not surprising since she's on fifteen committees, one international, the rest local, state or federal. The phone rang again, so I let myself out. David was working on the computer in the office. The boys, laughing at a video of Mr Bean in the living room, called out "You should watch this - Mr Bean is very funny." The joyous little person wouldn't be home till 6, with his father.

My heart was heavy for my lovely daughter, Elizabeth O'Brien, and for Harrison, my grandson, and for parents and grandparents of children whose bodies are host to a heavy metal and whose capacity to lead a full life is under threat.