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Press Statement **27 October 2021**

CAP: Expedite Regulatory Action to Eliminate Lead in Paints

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized 24–30 October 2021, as the International Lead Poisoning Prevention Week to raise awareness and promote actions to address the health impacts of lead exposure, especially on children, pregnant women and workers.

In conjunction with this occasion, the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) calls on the Malaysian government to expedite regulatory measures that would eliminate lead in paint.

It is almost 30 years since CAP made calls to the government to come out with standards for lead in paints. Till today we still find lead in our paints.

There have been recent efforts by the Department of Standards Malaysia to include specifications in their standards for certain types of paints that the ingredients used in the paint formulation shall not contain lead. However these standards are voluntary and do not cover the whole range of paints in the market.

There were some initiatives taken by the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs at the end of 2020 to come out with mandatory standards for lead in paints. The Ministry is in the process of developing regulations, and it is expected to be in force late next year.

The WHO calls lead paint "a major flashpoint" for children's potential lead poisoning and says that "since the phase-out of leaded petrol, lead paint is one of the largest sources of exposure to lead in children." Thus, urgent measures need to be taken to reduce critical sources of lead exposure to young children, in particular lead paint.

Lead is a cumulative toxicant that affects multiple body systems. It is particularly hazardous to young children and pregnant women. However, lead is harmful to all who are exposed.

Paints contain high levels of lead when the paint manufacturer intentionally adds one or more leaded compounds to the paint for some purpose. A paint product may also contain some amount of lead when paint ingredients contaminated with lead are used, or when there is cross-contamination from other product lines in the same factory.

Lead is harmful at all levels of exposure, thus there is no safe level of lead exposure. Young children are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning because they absorb 4–5 times as much ingested lead as adults from a given source. Moreover, children's innate curiosity and their age-appropriate hand-to-mouth behaviour result in their mouthing and swallowing lead-containing or lead-coated objects, such as contaminated soil or dust and flakes from decaying lead-containing paint.

Once lead enters the body, it is distributed to organs such as the brain, kidneys, liver and bones. The body stores lead in the teeth and bones, where it accumulates over time. Lead stored in bone may be released into the blood during pregnancy, thus exposing the fetus. Undernourished children are more susceptible to lead because their bodies absorb more lead if other nutrients, such as calcium or iron, are lacking. As highlighted by WHO, children at highest risk are the very young (including the developing

fetus) and the economically disadvantaged.

Effects of lead exposure include learning disabilities, increased risk of antisocial behaviour, reduced fertility and increased risks of renal and cardiovascular disease later in life. As well as affecting the individual, there is a cumulative impact on society as a whole. There is no safe level of exposure to lead and prevention of exposure is, therefore, critical.

CAP's study on lead in paint in the past revealed the following:

- In 1992, we found 7 out of 9 enamel paints tested to contain lead above 600 parts per million (ppm). The highest amount of lead in that study was 11,700 ppm.
- In 2016, we tested another 39 samples of enamel decorative paint. 16 of the samples contained a total lead concentration above 600 ppm. Out of which 12 samples contained dangerously high concentrations of lead above 10,000 ppm. The highest lead concentration detected was 150,000 ppm.
- In 2019, CAP's analysis revealed 11 out of 17 playground equipment had dangerously high lead levels above 10,000 ppm.
- In 2020, we tested spray paints. 12 out of 48 samples were found to contain lead, out of which 2 samples had lead greater than 10,000 ppm.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) estimated that in 2019, lead exposure accounted for 900 000 deaths and 21.7 million years of healthy life lost (disability-adjusted life years, or DALYs) worldwide due to long-term effects on health. The highest burden was in low- and middle-income countries. IHME also estimated that in 2019, lead exposure accounted for 62.5% of the global burden of developmental intellectual disability whose cause is not obvious, 8.2% of the global burden of hypertensive heart disease, 7.2% of the global burden of the ischaemic heart disease and 5.65% of the global burden of stroke.

Leaded paint is a continuing source of exposure in many countries. In view of the dangers of lead and taking into consideration that lead paint elimination is gaining momentum globally, CAP calls on the Malaysian government to expedite the promulgation and enforcement of laws to eliminate lead in paint.

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