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## Lead Poisoning and A Deadly Virus: Two Wakeup Calls for A Nation

Melinda Burgin '25

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Melinda Burgin

Lead Poisoning and A Deadly Virus: Two Wakeup Calls for A Nation

The Covid-19 pandemic is frequently referred to as an unprecedented public health crisis, one that spun out of control rapidly. While it is true that a worldwide pandemic was unexpected, its development bears striking similarities to public health crises of the not so distant past. As Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha chronicles in *What the Eyes Don't See*, the Flint water crisis appeared to arise out of the blue, but was actually rooted in decades of structural racism and the prioritization of profit. The SARS-CoV-2 virus was not caused by a policy decision. However, the devastating impact the virus continues to have, especially on low income and minority groups, is directly tied to the deep rooted issues that caused the Flint water crisis.

A telling story in *What the Eyes Don't See* is that of Charles Kettering, an auto engineer renowned for his contributions to General Motors (GM). Kettering chose to use the poisonous lead compound tetraethyl lead over safer options because it was the only patentable and therefore profitable choice, resulting in the death and severe illness of many. Dr. Robert Kehoe, (GM toxicologist), established the Kehoe Rule, that anything could be presumed safe until proven otherwise, contradicting the public health philosophy of remaining cautious until something is proven safe and establishing a precedent that allowed unethical business practices to legally continue. This precedent contributed to Flint's water crisis, as Flint's water source was chosen based on economic feasibility, without adequate or honest testing for health and safety, just because it had not yet caused harm.

Similarly, when the Covid-19 pandemic began, government choices prioritized profit over lives. The first case of Covid-19 in the U.S. was reported in January, yet the first actions towards mitigating it's spread were not taken until March (CNN). As researchers from Columbia University state, "early intervention and fast response are critical [in viral pandemics],"(qtd. CNN) and such intervention could have saved tens of thousands of lives. A significant portion of this hesitation to act can be attributed to reluctance to halt or slow economic activity. These stories illustrate some of the most egregious examples of American hunger for profit gone haywire, supporting Dr. Hanna-Attisha's argument that those in power are willing to ignore public health concerns for profit.

Flint, Michigan is one of America's few majority-minority communities and has a poverty rate of nearly 60% (Hanna-Attisha M.D.). In an already vulnerable city, lead in the water was especially catastrophic, as many families couldn't afford to use bottled water and many children already missed their yearly physicals or testing for lead poisoning. Flint's status as a lower income, higher minority population city also contributed to the lack of state action regarding the crisis, as the complaints of families about water quality and the rise in waterborne illnesses such as Legionnaire's disease were carelessly ignored and actively covered up for years. (Hanna-Attisha M.D. 286).

Even before the water crisis, Flint, like other areas populated by low income and minority groups, was disproportionately impacted by lead poisoning due to unrenovated homes and schools and industrial plants that released toxic fumes (Hanna-Attisha M.D. 196-97). Similarly,

Covid 19 disproportionately impacts minorities and low income families. According to Oxford researchers, more deaths have occurred among Black, LatinX, and Native American communities because these groups are “disproportionately affected by chronic medical conditions and lower access to healthcare” (Don et al...). Low income individuals, including many members of minority groups, frequently work essential, high risk jobs and may not have the option of following medical advice to stay home, may be uninsured, and are more likely to have preexisting health conditions, putting them at a higher risk of contracting Covid 19 (Time Magazine). Just as it took months for the state government to declare a state of emergency and adopt measures to help families stay safe in Flint, measures to help those disproportionately impacted by Covid 19 were adopted slowly, and not taken far enough to prevent grievous harm from being done. The lack of urgency behind these measures and disproportionate harm done supports Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s argument that structural racism is at play.

Flint’s public health crisis should have served as a warning for the future, a wakeup call to quickly act and take precautions in issues of public health, especially when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable populations. However, as seen in the handling of the Covid 19 pandemic, America has clearly not learned these lessons yet. Extreme crises like these can seem hopeless, but as Dr. Hanna-Attisha reminds us, “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste”. By looking at the Covid 19 pandemic as an opportunity to call out structural problems and change a system that isn’t working, we can emulate the Flint team’s passion for justice, and bring change to our own communities.



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