



Stretching the Boundaries – Doctors Changing the Landscape for Lead Exposure

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Doctors are trained to talk to patients and families in exam rooms. We teach medical students to sit down, make good eye contact, ask open-ended questions and listen intently. We are generally not trained to speak to lawyers in a courtroom or testify in front of city council. Yet, in order to help our patients in the exam room, we are sometimes called to speak to these different audiences.

Last year, the City of New Haven stopped examining the homes of children who had blood lead levels between 5-20 mcg/dl. The CDC recommends that the homes of children with lead levels in this range are tested. New Haven had been testing and yet, they stopped.

There were disagreements about why the City of New Haven stopped, but that did not affect why I chose to testify.

I testified because lead is a poison.

I testified because in New Haven, lead gets in children's blood streams through paint. Because lead-based paint was made illegal in 1978, it is more often found in homes in a state of disrepair.

It is more often found in homes of people living in poverty or near poverty.

As lead levels increase in a child's blood stream, their IQ decreases.

I testified because lead is a poison for everyone, but, like so many environmental toxins, its effects increase health and educational outcome inequities.

When asked to testify about the dangers of lead in a child's bloodstream by a lawyer from New Haven Legal Assistance, I was confident in my knowledge. I was not confident in the ways of a courtroom or a City Council room. The New Haven Legal Assistance lawyer told me that the lawyers defending the city's decision would not question my expertise. They did. They questioned what made me an expert. They questioned where I obtained my knowledge. They questioned why I was in the courtroom.

When I was a medical student, just before I went into an exam room, I rehearsed what I was going to say to the patient. These days, I walk in without rehearsing. I am very comfortable speaking with patients and families. I know how to establish rapport, listen, make a plan and make sure I have answered the family's questions. Parents challenge me on my use of antibiotics and my thoughts on discipline, but I usually manage to get us all to a place of agreement.

In the court room that day and speaking to City Council members, I pulled myself back into being a medical student, when communication didn't come naturally. I returned to those days when I rehearsed everything that I intended to say.

Testifying was a new set of skills. I was well-supported by the New Haven Legal Assistance lawyers and the MLPP lawyer but it was a new set of skills nonetheless.

We won the case ...

And this week the New Haven Board of Alders unanimously approved a new lead ordinance for the City of New Haven, clarifying that the Health Department "shall" inspect homes with children under six who have lead levels of 5 mcg/dl and above.

This is another victory for our children.

For more information about this story please read the WNPR article [here](#) and a New Haven Independent article [here](#).