HE GOT THE LEAD OUT

In the early ’70s, 200,000 tons of lead were blowing out of the exhausts of American cars each year and poisoning our children. Then in 1976, the EPA began the decades-long phasing down, then complete phasing out, of leaded gasoline from the nation’s roadways. That single act, which the research and advocacy of the University of Pittsburgh’s Herbert Needleman helped make possible, did more than anything else to taper blood levels of the toxin in children. (See our obituary on the famed Pitt pediatrician and emeritus professor of psychiatry on p. 38.)

“Dr. Needleman was a key figure in persuading the Environmental Protection Agency to take lead out of gasoline,” Mount Sinai’s Philip Landrigan told this magazine in 2001.

There’s more work to do, as disconcerting lead levels detected in water in some homes in Flint, Mich., Pittsburgh, and elsewhere, demonstrate. And lead in soil, dust, and paint chips is an even graver concern, says emeritus dean of Pitt’s Graduate School of Public Health Bernard Goldstein. Needleman also sounded the alarm about lead-based paint hazards.

Goldstein warns of a poison of another sort, recalling a speech President Obama made in Flint. The president cautioned against stigmatizing children who’ve been exposed to lead. “If you are my age, or older, or maybe even a little bit younger,” Obama said, “you got some lead in your system when you were growing up.”

Children’s lead levels today are typically about a fifth of what they were in Obama’s youth, thanks to Needleman. —Elaine Vitone