

Too high a price

By Jim Morris, Houston Chronicle

Ironworker Wayne Barrows can take some comfort in knowing that the lead poisoning that temporarily crippled and deafened him led to one of the nation's most successful worker-protection programs.

Barrows first appeared at a Yale University clinic in Groton, Conn., in 1988. There he was examined by Dr. Kathleen Maurer, an internist and occupational medicine specialist.

"He was the sickest lead-poisoned patient I've seen," Maurer said. "He walked like he was drunk. He had chronic ringing in his ears. He had pain and weakness in one of his arms."

When Barrows staggered in to the Yale clinic, he had been shuttling between three bridge rehabilitation jobs. His lead exposure came through welding, sandblasting and scaling (using an air-driven "needle gun") to remove old paint without respiratory protection.

"I was fairly new in the business," Barrows said. "I had just gotten my state welding license. I had no knowledge of the dangers out there."

The first symptom was bleeding from the ears, then dizziness and loss of appetite. Eventually the lead "almost caused me to be paralyzed," Barrows said. "The whole left side of my body was screwed up."

(Maurer later estimated that Barrows' blood-lead level reached 60 or 70 micrograms per deciliter. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration requires that a worker with a level of 50 micrograms or above be removed from a job, and some experts believe that damage can occur at 25.)

Doctors were slow to pick up on the source of Barrows' misery. "You wouldn't believe how many I went to before I found out," he said. "I was going deaf in one ear, and they couldn't figure out why." One doctor theorized that Barrows had a brain tumor.

Finally, an alert technician asked Barrows if he'd been tested for lead. He hadn't. The technician sent him to Yale, where Maurer and Dr. Martin Cherniak made the diagnosis. Barrows was out of work for six months, with no compensation, while he recovered.

"I felt really depressed," he said. "At the time I was making \$26 an hour, and I didn't want to throw it all away." He wondered if he had contaminated his three children, one of whom was still in his wife's womb.

Barrows' story has a happy ending. His children are fine. He is in reasonably good health, although some lead will remain in his bones and tissues for decades.

The contractor that overexposed him is out of business, and he is working for one that is far more safety-conscious.

Connecticut, through Maurer's efforts, now has an acclaimed program requiring that explicit worker-monitoring and protection provisions be written into all state bridge rehab contracts.

Maurer says that Barrows' case was the first and most compelling of several that motivated her.