

Carl Durham Award 2024

The Association of NC Boards of Health presented the Carl Durham Award to the Catawba County Public Health Environmental Health Team. The Catawba County Public Health Environmental Health team was commended for a grassroots public health investigation that led to a hazardous food substance being removed from grocers' shelves nationwide. The public health team had worked with a couple from Hickory NC after learning that their child's pediatrician had detected high lead levels in the couple's two toddlers. This situation was officially documented as lead poisoning.

After investigation of the "usual suspect" sources of lead in homes such as water, soil, dust, paint, and old blinds, the culprit was found to be a tainted children's applesauce product. Quick work from Catawba County public health authorities helped detect mass lead poisoning that had already affected more than 500 children in at least 44 states. Specifically, pouches of WanaBana brand applesauce flavored with cinnamon were the only foods the children were consuming that the parents were not, and this led to the confirmed testing showing this product to be the source of the lead. The cinnamon in the applesauce was tainted with lead chromate, a chemical known to be added to cinnamon to increase its weight and volume to fetch a higher price on the market.

In October 2023, WanaBana USA issued a voluntary recall of all WanaBana Apple Cinnamon Fruit Puree pouches. The recall also extends to two other private label brands distributed by the same company under the names Schnucks Apple Sauce pouches with cinnamon, and Weis Cinnamon Apple Sauce.

This incident demonstrates the effectiveness of local public health officials in their role of protecting the health of the public!