

Head lice: a report from the battlefield

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The fight against the head louse takes the form of a series of battles rather than a war. Hard-won victories are achieved at the cost of increased resistance by the survivors, who then re-group for a fresh onslaught. To maintain the initiative, a co-ordinated strategy is essential. This article reports on such a strategy, and on the materials that have been used to support it.

The results of a survey undertaken during 1983 in the East Devon Health Authority indicated that there was a 4% infection rate among the school population, although we were unaware of the incidence of infection in the wider community. Since the policy of screening all schoolchildren at regular intervals has proved to be an ineffective method of controlling the spread of the human head louse (*pediculus humanus capitis*), our aim is now to achieve a *collective community responsibility approach* by:

1. Achieving a deeper and shared understanding of the cause of the infection – that is, the life cycle of the louse.
2. Encouraging children and adults to perform simple and habit-forming good grooming practices.

All four Health Authorities within the county of Devon collaborated to achieve a common policy aim and choice of insecticide. This point is important, since to avoid a build-up of resistant louse strains the active agent used needs to be changed at regular intervals. All local pharmacists and GPs were made aware of our policy, and were requested to issue similar advice on treatment regimes if used as advisers.

However, the greatest stumbling-block to the eradication of head lice arises from the social stigma attached to the condition. We have, therefore, tried to establish a 'humane' approach in order to overcome these quite unnecessary feelings of shame, using leaflets designed specifically for different sections of the community. Every opportunity has been grasped to undertake social education using articles in school bulletins, church magazines, and the local press, as well as talks and training sessions using the BLM *Head Lice Advice* pack.

Teachers are in a unique position to assist us in changing attitudes to the head louse, and encouraging children and parents to involve themselves in the detection and the control of the infection – they observe the child for more hours a day than anyone else, and we have had great support from our Chief Education Officer. After the Senior Nurse with responsibility for child health had explained the change of policy, as described above, to every head teacher, schools portrayed the message by producing and exchanging posters, or mobile displays, on the value of good grooming. Good-quality combs have also been sold in schools at reasonable prices, and are used

within the general health education curriculum.

The battle is not an easy one – strong passions are aroused when promoting head lice control using the 'good grooming' tactics! Nevertheless, we are winning the battle: the 1985 infection rate was only 1.6% of the primary and middle school population.

The following publications and resources have been found useful.

Head Lice Advice (audio-visual fact pack)

This pack contains a user's manual, slides, tape cassette, and a hand viewer or magnifier with two mounted lice and one mounted nit (egg). The tape and slides are designed for use on automatic tape-slide projectors. The commentary, which is clear, easy to understand, and totally unbiased towards any particular pharmaceutical product, is suitable for an audience over about nine years of age.

The manual contains guidelines for presentation, together with informative facts about head lice in question-and-answer format – for example, *Do lice do anything to you other than make you itch?* The mounted slides show exactly what to look for. It is always surprising how many parents, teachers, and health workers have never seen a head louse or its eggs. This back is as easy to use in a classroom as in the kitchen of a village hall (for example, during playgroup sessions). BLM Publications, £35.00.

Diagnostic pocket pack This consists of a pocket-sized plastic pack containing explanatory notes, a hand viewer or

magnifier together with a mounted louse and a nit, two helpful diagnostic slides, a pocket comb engraved with *Head louse exterminator*, and a fine-toothed comb called *The nit picker*. Children enjoy handling the magnifier, and are fascinated by the small size of the louse and the eggs. The humorous tone of the combs underlines the importance of grooming. This pack is the ideal reference to keep in schools and clearly answers the questions *Exactly what should we look for?* and *Has he or she caught head lice?* BLM Publications, £4.50.

Hunt the Head Louse – first steps in health education for kids and grown-ups, by Ian Burgess and Pat Shepherd (15 pages, soft cover). This is an informative book for all ages, with a simple yet scientific text. The illustrations are in good-humoured cartoon format in black and red, and accompany the presentation of information to children in the first half of the book. The second half is directed at parents, and in a matter-of-fact manner attempts to dispel many of the myths surrounding head lice, while at the same time giving good sound advice. BLM Publications, £1.75.

(We know that a number of school nurses read *Education and Health*, and would welcome any reflections they may have on the effectiveness of head-lice strategies in the schools they serve. Have any heads or teachers comments to make on how their school communities have responded to local initiatives? – Ed.)