

From the Chief Medical Officer  
Dr Michael McBride



Department of  
**Health, Social Services  
and Public Safety**

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AN ROINN

**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta  
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

MÁNNYSTRIE O

**Poustie, Resydènter Heisin  
an Fowk Siccar**

## HSS(MD) 2/2010

Chief Executives, Public Health Agency/ HSC  
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Director of Public Health, Public Health Agency  
Assistant Director Health Protection, Public Health  
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Date: 14 January 2010

Dear Colleague

### **MERCURY EXPOSURE FROM SKIN LIGHTENING CREAMS**

The Health Protection Agency (HPA) has informed the Department that they have become aware that skin lightening creams containing mercury are being sold in the UK and on the internet.

Recently, cream has been sold on the internet that was found to contain up to 3% of mercury. Mercury blood analysis from those using the cream has shown elevated mercury concentrations and has been potentially linked to acute nephrotic syndrome.

#### **Background**

Skin lightening creams are widely used by women of Asian and African origin. There are a number of products that are sold legally in the UK but there are also a number of products that contain illegal active ingredients. The active ingredients in these creams may be hydroquinone, mercury or corticosteroids. It is not legal to sell products in Europe with mercury as the active ingredient.

Published reports of unexplained nephrotic syndrome<sup>1,2,3</sup> have been associated with the use of face lightening creams and elevated blood mercury concentrations. Long term use of such products can lead to a number of adverse health effects including dermatological disorders, hypertension, hypercorticism and mercurial nephropathy.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Mercury blood concentrations can become elevated within a very short period (48 hrs) of using the cream and can remain elevated for up to 45 days after discontinuing its use<sup>7</sup>.

## Investigations

Recent investigations involving trading standards departments in Great Britain have revealed that illegally imported creams from Pakistan and other parts of the world are on sale in the UK. Not all imported face lightening products in the UK are illegal but creams without a list of ingredients in English and a UK contact address may be found to have been imported into the country illegally. These may contain illegal active ingredients such as mercury. Trading standards officials in GB are investigating the source of these products and have removed supplies from a number of traders in different parts of the country.

The HPA has been advised by trading standards departments that the sale and use of similar items has been ongoing for some time. There is therefore a possibility of other currently unascertained cases of mercurial nephropathy associated with the use of illegal skin lightening creams in the UK. Accordingly, the possible diagnosis of mercurial nephropathy caused by the use of illegal skin lightening cream should be considered in women of Asian or African origin who present with a clinical picture of renal impairment.

## Actions for GPs

If you become aware of potential cases of women of Asian or African origin with unexpected renal impairment, you should ascertain the following.

- Is there a history of using skin lightening cream?
- Where was the cream purchased?
- Duration of use of the cream?
- Are any other alternative treatments being used?
- Where cream is still in use, diagnosis through blood analysis will be required (GPs should liaise with their local biochemistry laboratories regarding local arrangements for mercury analysis).
- Analysis of the cream being used would be beneficial for diagnosis (GPs should liaise with their local biochemistry laboratories to ascertain the name and contact details of the local arrangements for mercury analysis).

Please contact the Public Health Agency for further information and advice and to report any potential cases on 028 90553994 or 028 90553997.

At present, it is not thought that any Northern Ireland residents have been affected, however, I thank you for your assistance in this matter. If you have any questions or concerns about exposure to mercury in face lightening cream, please do not hesitate to contact the Public Health Agency.

Yours sincerely



**DR MICHAEL MCBRIDE**  
Chief Medical Officer

