Risk of brain damage in babies from naphthalene in mothballs: call to consider a national ban

William O Tarnow-Mordi, Nick J Evans, Kei Lui, Brian Darlow, on behalf of the Advisory Committee of the Australian and New Zealand Neonatal Network

To the Editor: About 5% of Australians of Asian, African, Middle Eastern or Mediterranean descent have glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency. Affected babies can develop massive haemolysis within hours of exposure to clothes stored with mothballs containing naphthalene. It has long been known that this results in severe jaundice, which may lead to kernicterus and profound brain damage, for which the cost is either a lifetime of dependency and very expensive care, or death.

We are aware of three cases of kernicterus in babies with G6PD deficiency in Australia in the past 3 years, one of which was associated with exposure to naphthalene in mothballs. One baby died. The exact incidence of severe neonatal jaundice and kernicterus in Australia is unknown, but it is the subject of an ongoing study funded by the Cerebral Palsy Foundation and coordinated through the Australian Paediatric Surveillance Unit.

In Australia, packages of naphthalene mothballs must carry a warning that the product is harmful to children. However, clinical directors of neonatal units that comprise the Australian and New Zealand Neonatal Network have unanimously agreed that warning labels give insufficient protection. They have called on the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) to act in harmony with the European Union, which banned the sale of mothballs containing naphthalene in 2008, following a report by the European Chemicals Bureau. The adverse risk–benefit ratio for naphthalene provides strong justification for its withdrawal. A submission to this effect has been lodged with the APVMA.

Some mothballs contain paradichlorobenzene, a chemical related to naphthalene and associated with haemolysis. Less toxic products that protect clothes against moths exist. Department stores in the United Kingdom have replaced moth repellents containing naphthalene with products containing natural substances, such as sandalwood and lavender.

Between 2004 and 2010, the New South Wales Poisons Information Centre reported 53 calls in 2008. While acknowledging the importance of raising awareness of the dangers of naphthalene, we believe that the safest course is prevention — that is, an Australia-wide ban of mothballs containing naphthalene.

Readers who wish to report cases of naphthalene toxicity are encouraged to contact APVMA at aerp@apvma.gov.au.

Acknowledgements: We acknowledge the Advisory Committee of the Australian and New Zealand Neonatal Network for endorsing this letter. We thank Judith Kirby, Department Head, NSW Poisons Information Centre, for providing the data in the Box.

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