MANAGEMENT OF INSECTICIDE RESISTANCE IN HEAD LICE, LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE UK EXPERIENCE

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Concerns that treatments for head louse infestation were not working adequately in the UK were first raised in the mid-1980's. Some of those fears were groundless but others were clearly due to incipient resistance that was being suppressed by use of alternative insecticides. When resistance was first identified to pyrethroids in 1994, after only 3 years of use it was at first thought to be a local phenomenon due to prior use of DDT. However, subsequent investigations showed that the pattern and physiology of resistance was more complex and that its progress could be followed rapidly in some communities. The change in resistance pattern also progressed more rapidly that information could be disseminated. It was found that most health practitioners were not only out of date in their recommendations for treatment but also reluctant to change their habits.

Management of the emerging resistance was achievable provided a robust approach to the problem could be made. However, efforts to deal with the problems were then met with demands for evidence that any approach would work prior to inception. Such a stance taken by some workers ignored the needs of the individual sufferer and did nothing to further community control of infestation. The result is that many people have now turned to unregulated alternative methods of treatment that may include approaches that are less effective and/or more toxic than the insecticides they are avoiding.