

PARENTAL REPORTS ARE AN UNRELIABLE INDICATOR OF HEAD INFECTIONS IN SCHOOLS.

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Anecdotal reports from school staff and parents in Victoria, Australia suggest head lice problems have escalated in the last ten years, generating considerable distress and frustration to the school community. We assessed the utility of parental reporting as the basis for schools to implement an effective management strategy, with minimum disruption to the school. Screening was conducted in 17 government primary schools, nine from rural Victoria and eight from metropolitan Melbourne. Schools and classes were randomly selected to participate in the study. The parent/guardian of each child within the selected class were asked for consent to examine their child's scalp and hair for head lice. Prior to the screening, they were asked to indicate if their child currently had head lice. Children were screened using the conditioner and combing detection method and the results compared with the questionnaire answers. An active infection was defined as the presence of lice or the presence of viable louse eggs. A total of 1838 children were screened and 13% (n=241) were found to have head lice infection. We were able to assess the validity of parental report (indicating whether or not the parent believed their child had head lice) for 83% of children screened (1527/1830). The parents of 36 children reported their child currently had head lice but infection was detected in only 19 of these (positive predictive value = 53%). Parents of 1067 children reported their child did not currently have head lice, yet 51 children were found to have an active infection (negative predictive value 95%). Of the returned surveys, 28% of parents (n=424) either did not answer the question or indicated they did not know if their child currently had head lice, forty-nine of these children (12%; n=424) had active infection. Parental reporting of head lice is not a reliable indicator (of the prevalence of head lice) in a setting of low prevalence. Strategies for improving the detection of head lice within the home, implementing appropriate treatment and preventing unnecessary treatment are important. This study provides a baseline against which future strategies, such as education of parents about the use of the hair conditioner and combing method, can be measured.