

The Case of the Mercury Heart

Sir,

We were interested in the letter entitled "The Case of the Mercury Heart" by Muzio, Guaerra and Rongioletti (1). One of us, JT, reported a patient with a particularly severe rash in the groin and vulvar area after dental amalgam work (2). It transpired that the patient had been sensitised to phenyl mercuric salt in a spermicidal cream.

In Scotland there are still a large number of silver amalgam fillings inserted annually. For the year 1993, 787,000 fillings were performed. This compares with 1,772,993 in 1968 (Scottish Dental Estimates Board). Thus, as a very crude estimate, assuming on average a million fillings a year for 25 years with a mean mercury content of 1.5 g, then 37.5 metric tons of mercury has been used for this purpose in a population of about 5.5 million.

There have been recent UK media suggestions of possible systemic dangers of mercury amalgam fillings, and the public is being encouraged to consider removal and replacement by other materials despite the fact that there is little scientific evidence for this (3). Replacement may go ahead, and thus a considerable number of people will be subjected to a sudden increase in mercury exposure. There may therefore be an increase in cases presenting with mercury toxicity. The flexural nature of the eruption has been commented upon by other authors (4,5).

Spermicidal creams containing mercury are no longer available in the United Kingdom or, to the best of our knowledge, in Europe. They may, however, have been previously used by those now middle-aged. This is the age group with a large preponderance of mercury amalgam fillings. It may be worth enquiring along appropriate lines in such patients presenting with flexural, or in particular, a genital rash.

REFERENCES

1. Muzio GF, Guarrera M, Rongioletti F. The case of the mercury heart. *Acta Derm Venereol* (Stockh) 1994; 74: 149-150.
2. Thomson J, Russell JA. Dermatitis due to mercury following amalgam dental restorations. *Br J Dermatol* 1970; 82: 292-296.
3. Mjor IA. Side effects of dental materials. *BMJ* 1994; 9: 621-622.
4. Frykholm KO. On mercury from dental amalgam: its toxic and allergic effects and some comments on occupational hygiene. *Acta Odont Scand* 1957; 15: Suppl. 22.
5. Fernström AIB, Frykholm KO, Huldt S. Mercury allergy with eczematous dermatitis due to silver amalgam fillings. *Br Dent J* 1962; 113: 204.

Accepted November 3, 1994.

John Thomson and Susan Holmes
Department of Dermatology, Glasgow Royal Infirmary University NHS Trust, 86 Castle Street, Glasgow G4 0SF, Scotland, UK.