

**P-04-582 Much Needed Change to the Rules in our Schools with Regards to Head Lice and Nits – Correspondence from the Hairforce – Lice Assassins to the Committee, 22.09.14**

**WELSH ASSEMBLY PETITION**

**P-04-582 Much needed change in the rules in our schools with regards to Head Lice and Nits**

**Supporting arguments by Natalie Nurse, The Hairforce – Lice Assassins, Cardiff**

I wish to submit supporting arguments to the above petition submitted by Marnie Hill. I run the Cardiff branch of a business dedicated to the professional checking and clearing of head lice and their eggs (the nits), The Hairforce – Lice Assassins. In this position I am uniquely placed to give insight into both the research that exists around this topic and the human evidence extracted from our client base, and how both these sources support the need for the sort of change the petition is seeking.

**WHY EVIDENCE SUPPORTS THE PETITION:**

**1. The highly infectious nature of the issue**

Head lice are passed from human to human by close contact, and that contact is a natural occurrence in the classroom and in the playground amongst groups of children. Children carrying head lice therefore put other children constantly at risk.

A quantification of that risk can be found in academic research which shows that as far back as 2005 nearly 50% of 4-11 year olds, or nearly 3 million children, have nits and lice annually in the UK, with 10% to 15% having them at any one time. Researchers suspect that this figure is a gross underestimate of the true size of the issue in 2014. In addition the traditional way of measuring the reach of the problem – i.e. just the 4 to 11 age group – does not take into account the rise of nursery education, and therefore the under 4 age group; the fact that infestations are carried from primary school into the secondary school system, so beyond the age of 11; and the rest of the family members – parents, grandparents, and carers who are often infested by the primary carrier. Research in 2011 estimated that a quarter of all parents caught Head Lice from their children.

The speed at which infestations are properly dealt with is therefore critical to containing the repercussions through the age ranges and through different environments.

The market growth rates amongst 4–11 year olds since the late 1990's show a significant pattern of growth – 19% 1997; 28% 1998; 37% 2003; 50% 2005 (Sources: KG Coates; 1997 & 1998 AM Downs; 2003 J Harris; 2005 Hill).

In addition research shows that as Head Lice spread, growing numbers of children have their schooling adversely affected, and with that their parents working lives similarly disrupted – children lose 2.74 million days from school, and parents take 2.78 million days off work to tackle infestations (Sept 2011 NYDA). An Ipsos Mori poll in the same year in Northern Ireland revealed that parents were taking 97,120 days off work and children were losing 63,327 days of school as a result of the problem (Sept 2011).

## 2. The negative effect on the well-being of our children within School

In 2012 a ground breaking piece of research appeared in the USA which strips away the traditional product bias in Head Lice research and turned to the children and their interests. The publisher of this research – the **National Association of Social Workers** – gives both credibility and a refreshing sense of honesty to the paper. Significantly this is a body that is child centric not product sales driven.

This 2012 research by Purdy and True, whilst conducted in America, speaks of our children here in Wales and the rest of the UK. Their child centred study sought to discover the personal and emotional responses of children to having head lice – and their findings will be of interest to all, as they hinge on the very happiness of the children.

The research identified that amongst 7–11 year olds having head lice was seen by the individual child as a 'symbolic failure', associated with (real and imagined) ridicule and blame from peers. There was a strong association of head lice with embarrassment, sadness and anger, as well as peer rejection and negative labelling:

- 60% of children interviewed had **experienced public humiliation** as a result of having head lice

- 90% reported being **teased by schoolmates, parents, and relatives** when they had head lice
- **Rejection** by peers was the number one concern of the participating children
- Peer **acceptance was greatly diminished** for a child who had head lice; and **negative labelling** often **followed the child throughout his or her school life**
- The majority of the children in the study showed signs of **diminished self-perception** because of this issue. Furthermore, most of the children felt a sense of personal responsibility for having lice, and expressed feelings of being 'bad' or 'dirty'

All the findings '**illustrated the intense negative impact that head lice infestations, and the perceptions surrounding infestations could have on children**'.

The credibility of this research is underpinned by its clinical methodology. It utilises cognitive-developmental frameworks used in understanding child development. The cross referencing of those frameworks with what these children revealed has lead Purdy and Ture to believe that these effects can have **long term implications into adulthood**. They write that negative self-perception can remain with a child for years and has the potential to affect their social development – 'A sense of inferiority develops when perceived or actual failure is dominant. A child with head lice may experience teasing from peers, resulting in exclusion from activities and relationships. Consequent inferiority may evolve into the reduction of self-esteem, isolation, and shame. The child may feel less worthy of respect from others and inadequate in social situations. These person-environment relationships are critical to the development of competence, self-direction, relatedness, and self-esteem. Repeated head lice infestations may prevent the sense of belonging necessary to the preparation for competent adult performance.' This theory is supported by the work of leading authorities in child psychology (Erickson and Piaget) who believe that positive development is critical if a child is to achieve psychological competence.

The findings of this research are supported by The Hairforce – Lice Assassins, the UK’s nit and head lice clearing service. Through our hands-on work physically clearing thousands of infestations, we witness the diminishing effects head lice have on children on a day to day basis. Clearing a sustained and/or heavy infestation can transform a child; elicit immediate comments from the school and their teachers about them socially and academically; positively change their demeanor and their feelings towards going to school; and physically restore them and their health. One of the most frequent comments from the parents of the children they clear is ‘my child is his or herself again’. To quote Dee Wright of The Hairforce, ‘Because we work closely with the child and see them over a number of appointments we can actually track and witness the effects head lice have, and the positive change that is evident as they are cleared. What these children need more than anything is to get this parasite and its eggs, the nits, out of their hair quickly, safely and effectively so they can get on with their childhood and schooling, and be restored as a person’.

### **3. The risk to the health of our children in School**

The significance of Head Lice as a health issue has for some time been pigeon-holed by the Department of Health and Education, as a minor issue. However thinking ignores significant facts concerning Head Lice:

- They are blood suckers and move from host to host in a society that is more mobile and more international
- Pediculosis, the medical term for an infestation of lice, is a communicable disease and causes serious dis-ease for those who catch it
- They are commonly known in public health to carry the highly infectious impetigo
- There is growing evidence and data to show that these parasites carry serious organisms that impact on human health – this link is to a

comprehensive list of research findings which gives significant weight to this argument <http://www.headlice.org/news/research/index.htm>

#### **4. No nit policies work in the USA**

No nit policies are a policy of zero tolerance of Head Lice in the classroom and were a part of American school culture for many years. Some states abandoned them a few years ago because of the very issues raised by Marnie in her Petition – fear of exclusion, discrimination etc. Since rescinding that policy many schools in the USA have found that the Head Lice situation has significantly worsened and in the last year many school boards have returned to no nit policy ([www.headlice.org](http://www.headlice.org) has tracked this policy reversal).

#### **HOW THE HAIRFORCE – LICE ASSASSINS CAN HELP**

##### **1. We counter the ineffectiveness of the products**

In 2006 research by the National Public Health Service for Wales Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre in Cardiff published a leading piece of research on Head Lice. The results conclusively showed that 80% of the time lice were immune to the products applied to eradicate Head Lice. This research was based on a substantial sample drawn from 3 of the 5 health authority areas of Wales. The findings confirmed that Head Lice had further evolved developing immunity to the various chemical formulas that constitute this £33 million market.

This research confirmed what a lot of parents already knew, and still know – the products do not deliver what they say they do, often establishing a long term cycle of despair for both the parents and the child.

The leading entomologists in the UK believe that 80% figure to be higher in 2014, and at The Hairforce the parents we see are living testament to that – using products regularly but still remaining infested.

This evidence is played out consistently in the press. In Caroline Scott's substantial article on head lice in the Daily Mail in September 2012 she made a very clear analysis of how parents – especially mum's – are peddled false hope by Head Lice products under the guise of 'expert' advice. It was a healthy break

from the usual hopeless narrative around head lice, because it gave further in-depth explanation as to why this problem just simply won't go away. Scott wrote about Clara who has 'tried every product on the market without success ranging, from tea-tree and herbal shampoos to some really nasty chemicals'. At The Hairforce - Lice Assassins, we see this same experience repeated time after time amongst our substantial client base.

One of the accusations levied at mums is that somewhere in every class there is a mum that doesn't care about head lice, and because she doesn't tackle it everyone else's efforts are undermined. What we see, and what Scott's article verifies, is that mums try very hard to do something about head lice but the products they are using on the back of expert advice are letting them down. If, as the article lays bare, products are often backed by poor evidence; deeply flawed research (the base sizes of much of the research are shockingly low); and more worryingly research - and therefore the 'impartial' experts behind that research - is funded by the drug companies themselves, you see an equivalent to a Ponzi scheme with concerned parents as the losers. As Scott concludes 'It's an ideal market to sell expensive products that don't quite work.'

In our business we see the really unacceptable face of this when we clear heavy infestations. The worst case we have ever seen is of a 6 year old girl whose very serious infestation had been tackled by her GP with repeated prescriptions of dimeticone over a long period of time. What we found was a child whose hair was brittle, whose scalp was scarred, and most distressingly whose hair was simply coming away in places when you attempted to nit comb - and who was still riddled with head lice. Repeated uses of dimeticone hadn't solved anything and had literally siliconed the nits so firmly onto the hair that you couldn't get all of them off. You may feel criticism for the mother when you read this, but she made repeated trips to her GP for help and with his help put her faith in a product.

The Hairforce was developed as a direct response to the 80% failure rate delivered by the products. We believe that parents and children deserve an open and honest solution to the Head Lice issue, which supports rather than exploits them. 'We do exactly what we say on the tin' and we back this with a 100% guarantee that we will shut it all down and end the infestation. Our process is entirely chemical free so Head Lice are unable to become immune to our

process. We use a clever combination of technology (we Hoover the hair with a specialist lice Hoover, and dehydrate the eggs with controlled heated air) and hand removal. In just 2 appointments, 7 days apart – 2.5 hours of intense, forensic work – we remove everything, cutting off the development process. In contrast a parent can be many weeks, often months, and sometimes years struggling to keep it under control themselves. That invariably involves a lot of product – and at the price of the products, that can add up to a lot of money. People who use our service would say it is the best money they have ever spent after having lived with months or years trying to clear them. We use unique controlled, heated air technology with the to dehydrate the nits in order to speed up the whole process, but we also do what Scott advocates in her Daily Mail article – we remove all the nits (the eggs), because at the heart of shutting down an infestation you need to get those nits out of the hair. The products would have you believe that isn't necessary because they want you to keep using them, time and time again.

At the end of the day Hedrin Once have used the following line in their TV campaign for a reason – ‘Hedrin Once **could** kill head lice and their eggs’ – because the advertising regulators who caution against unsubstantiated promises would have made them.

It is clear that the focus on product has been allowed to drive the policy and policy makers have not listened to both the research that repeatedly challenges their effectiveness, nor to the parents who are constantly fire-fighting this issue. But when products are so fundamentally ineffective and repeated applications simply add to the problem, allowing infestations to often take a hold and multiply substantially this means the problem is never really addressed. Because of this we would argue that the authorities need to step back from this product focus and say at the center of this issue are the children, their welfare, and their happiness, and there is a fundamental need for a truly effective approach to clearing and shutting down head lice infestations and to controlling the situation.

## 2. We are fast

If a child is identified as having Head Lice we need to see them twice, 7 days apart. For an average infestation the first appointment is 1.5 hours at which we

clear everything out that is visible. This means that child can go straight back to school and get on with their studies without being infectious to anyone else and the parent can get back to work.

We would then see them a week later for a one hour appointment. This second appointment deals with those eggs that are not visible at the first appointment because when Head Lice lay their eggs they are invisible sacks of liquid. After their second appointment everything has been extracted and the infestation totally shut down.

Heavy and very heavy infestations require a third appointment. At the first appointment two Lice Assassins would work on the hair together to extract the extra volume of both Head Lice and nits (the eggs).

Alternatively with the products parents are working with 20% effectiveness rate and must then remove all the eggs to ensure further hatching does not occur.

### **3. We can provide the role of Nit Nurse in Schools**

We provide schools with a professional Checking service where we can check specific classes or the whole school. These are constructed to preserve the privacy of the children. Each child receives exactly the same check regardless of whether we can identify Head Lice or not, ensuring that no one can work out who has it and who doesn't. Results are not communicated to anyone during the process. At the end of the job we then hand over the results to a dedicated person who will then email those parents whose children are found to have Head Lice.

This service removes the uncertainty of who may or may not have Head Lice and how it is identified, and then ensures the problem is tackled for that community.

In addition we also conduct forensic Head Lice checks for other members of the family if they are unsure whether they have caught them or not, ensuring that the cycle of re-infestation is prevented.

### **How we can work with the Welsh Government**

A petition of this nature has immense logic when you examine the situation – this is an infectious disease that can spread swiftly within the school environment, with significant repercussions for children and their parents. The Petition is one pillar of

the support parents and children require. They also need an effective way of shutting down the infestation and getting their child back into school. The potential for failure at this stage needs to also be established. We can provide this essential support.

### **1. Providing a support service to those with Head Lice**

We can provide some very clear deliverables

- We can clear head lice infestations guaranteeing 100% effectiveness
- We can significantly shorten the time children are away from school and get them back in the classroom in a matter of hours without any risk to their classmates
- We can check the whole family to identify who else has them and reduce the risk of re-infestation
- We can deliver a service and approach that removes the stigma of Head Lice for individuals and within the community

### **2. Checking service in Schools**

We can provide a supportive network of detection that enables the school system to professionally identify those in need

- A discreet, privacy preserving checking service for all with a link to then clearing

### **3. Expand to meet demand**

Our employment model is to create part time employment for women in the community, offering 15 to 18 hours a week paid work. This fits with the demands of family life and brings women back into the job market. This model would enable expansion through the school system as well as benefit the community with employment opportunities.

### **4. Establishing the relationship and raising awareness in Schools**

We can work with the Welsh Assembly and the school system in establishing this solution to the Head Lice issue and in communicating it to the parents:

- A launch road show for school staff, parents and school nurses
- Educational pack and/or mobile phone app
- School email communication pack for schools to parents
- You Tube demonstration and education

**Natalie Nurse**

**Lice Assassin**

**The Hairforce – Lice Assassins**

[www.thehairforce.co.uk](http://www.thehairforce.co.uk)

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**Key sources for reference:**

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2. The Times 14<sup>th</sup> June 2006 'Head lice defeat the lotions & potions. How lice are becoming invincible'
3. Daily Mail, Caroline Scott 20<sup>th</sup> September 2011 'Head lice cures are money down the drain'
4. NYDA publication 27<sup>th</sup> September 2011 Ipsos MORI (2011) Capibus Survey. Head Lice Study. 08 July–14 July 2011
5. Belfast Telegraph, Claire McNeilly 15<sup>th</sup> September 2011 'Parents missing 97,120 days at work because of head lice'

These sources can be provided if requested.

