Correspondence

Communication on the dangers and abuse of skin lighteners in Africa
To the Editor:

The 4th African Ethnic Skin and Hair Workshop took place at the Continental Hotel, Nairobi, Kenya, from November 8-11, 2012. The workshop deliberated extensively on various dermatoses that affect people of African descent.

The previous workshop, held in Accra, Ghana, in 2010, saw the presentations of three scientific studies focusing on the issues of skin lighteners.1,2 The lectures were delivered by Dr. Ncoza Dlova from South Africa on Skin lightening creams used in Durban, South Africa”,2 Dr. Koussake Kombate from Togo on “Acne and skin bleaching in Lome”,1 and Dr. Fatima Ly from Senegal on the Refusal of skin bleaching, the other side of “xessal”.1

Nairobi welcomed 80 delegates and experts from the USA, France, and many from 22 African countries including Burkina Faso, Burundi, Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Rwanda, South Africa, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The workshop was declared open by a representative of the Kenyan Minister of Health, Dr. Lillian A. Kocholla, Head, Projects and Programs Coordinator, Ministry of Medical Services, Nairobi, Kenya. A keynote address was delivered by the president of the Kenyan Association of Dermatologists, Dr. Evanson Kamuri.

Speakers included clinicians as well as scientists working on stem cell and hair research from France and the USA. Issues affecting community dermatology, such as the burden of skin diseases, skin cancer in skin of color, oculocutaneous albinism in Africa, use of sunscreens, needs and expectations of skin of color in African women, impact of soap pH on skin conditions, role of traditional plants, and probable genetic factors in central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia were discussed.

Participants deliberated on the issue of skin bleaching, which is a major challenge to all dermatologists in Africa.1–6 They felt that this deserved urgent political action due to the devastating consequences of skin cancer, ochronosis, fungal infections, acne, and striae. Even though the conditions are preventable, they pose a heavy, serious burden on dermatological services throughout Africa. Participants identified ignorance of the consequences and easy access to bleaching agents as major areas of consideration for addressing this epidemic.

The workshop produced the following recommendations.
1 All Ministries of Health in Africa should embark on advocacy programs to educate their citizens on the dangers of using skin-bleaching cosmetics.
2 All relevant African government agents should take appropriate steps to restrict access to bleaching products that contain hydroquinone, mercury, phenol, resorcinol, and all forms of corticosteroids.
3 All governments should implement strict measures to remove all known skin-bleaching cosmetics from over-the-counter shelves.
4 Educating the youth about the dangers of skin lighteners should target schools and other youth programs.
5 Heavy penalties should be levied on companies that continue to manufacture the implicated products.
6 Advertorials that promote fair skin as a symbol of beauty and use of fair-skinned models to promote cosmetics that target the black market should be restricted or at least discouraged.
7 The media should be used to create awareness about the dangers of skin bleaching (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.) to all African women and men.

Appendix

Prevention and Education on Skin Lightening Abuse in Africa Task Team
Date: 09.11.2012; Venue: Nairobi Intercontinental Hotel, Kenya.

Present:
Dr. Ncoza Dlova (Dermatology Department, Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine, UKZN, South Africa)
Dr. Frances Ajose (Dermatology Department, Lagos University, Nigeria)
Dr. Melanie Juliana Miyanji de Souza (Nairobi, Kenya)
Dr. Fatima Ly (Dermatology Department, University of Senegal)

Other Recruited Members:
Dr. Adebola Ogunbiyi (Department of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Nigeria)
Dr. Evans Kamuri (Nairobi, Kenya)

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References


