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# The School Nurse and Oh, NO—Head Lice

By DeEtte Hall, RN, MN, Maine

There is little in school nursing that generates that plummeting feeling—the urgent desire to escape—more than that old nemesis, pediculosis. Nearly all school nurses somewhere in their careers have had to face the issue of head lice. This often includes outraged parents, concerned school administrators, and children who are puzzled by all the fuss. School nurses play a vital role in shaping the school's response to this problem.

There has been a shift over the past several years in recommendations for addressing head lice in schools. NASN has recommended that schools eliminate their “no nit” policies.<sup>1</sup> The Harvard School of Public Health has recommended that children not be sent home when lice or their eggs on the hair are discovered.<sup>2</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a clinical report recommending that students remain in class the day head lice are found and that they be allowed to return after proper treatment.<sup>3</sup> There are several reasons for these recommended changes:

- Pediculosis is not a disease or an agent that spreads disease.
- The Harvard School of Public Health has discovered that there is significant misdiagnosis of head lice.<sup>4</sup>
- Students are missing school unnecessarily. In Maine, it is anecdotally reported the some students are missing weeks at a time.
- Removing students from school and peer teasing can affect emotional well-being.
- Students are unnecessarily being exposed to toxic pesticide treatment.

School nurses play a critical role in changing school policy. Educating school administrators, school boards, and parents is a challenging proposition and requires factual information, persuasion, and patience, skills that school nurses have acquired. The results can be quite rewarding—reduced hysteria among teachers and parents, reduced school nurse time required to address this issue, and reduced teasing and harassment of students.

In Maine, the Department of Education, in conjunction

with the School Health Advisory Committee, instituted a number of recommendations:

1. Eliminate routine head checks for head lice; check only symptomatic students or students in close contact with the student with head lice.
2. Do not exclude students from school but contact parents and provide information about treatment.
3. Allow students to return to school after treatment has begun.
4. Offer extra assistance to students with chronic infestations.

The first step in implementing these recommendations was educating school nurses. Dr. Richard Pollack from the Harvard School of Public Health was invited to speak at the 2002 Maine School Nurse Summer Institute, where he presented a convincing argument for the need to change policy. Amanda Rowe, a school nurse and advocate, will continue the education at the 2003 School Nurse Summer Institute by conducting a session on implementing the new policies at the school level. The second step was to inform school administrators. The Maine Department of Education Commissioner issued an “Informational Letter” to all superintendents describing the recommended policy changes and the rationale behind the recommendations. A sample parent letter was made available to school nurses. The third step will be to inform pediatricians of the recommendations through their American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Maine Chapter's newsletter.

It is too early to gauge the effect that these recommended changes will have on the lives of students. However, anecdotally, school nurses report that there has not been an increase in the numbers of students with head lice and students are not missing a significant amount of school time as they had in the past. This is yet another area in which school nurses can influence students' educational achievement.

Has Maine been successful in uniformly changing school policy? Far from it; however, some schools have changed

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their procedures for addressing this issue, and more are contemplating the change. Any change is difficult; it will take time. Just one school nurse with patience and enthusiasm can make a significant difference in the lives of students.

Maine's recommendations and information on head lice can be found on the Maine School Health Manual Web site at [www.state.me.us/education/sh/index.html](http://www.state.me.us/education/sh/index.html). Click on "Table of Contents" and find Pediculosis.

1. National Association of School Nurses Web site:  
[www.nasn.org/positions/nitfree.htm](http://www.nasn.org/positions/nitfree.htm)
2. Harvard School of Public Health Web site:  
[www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/headlice.html)
3. Frankowski, B., & Weiner, L. (2002). "Head lice" clinical report: American Academy of Pediatrics. *Pediatrics*, 110(3), 638-643.
4. Pollack, R., Kiszewski, A., & Spielman, A. (2000). Overdiagnosis and consequent mismanagement of head louse infestations in North America. *Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal*, 19, 689-693.

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