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MERCURY POISONING FROM UNREGISTERED SKIN PRODUCT: A MULTIAGENCY APPROACH IN MALAYSIA

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, inorganic mercury has been added to certain cosmetics products for skin lightening and acne treatment purposes before it was prohibited due to its highly toxic properties. These products have led to multiple cases of mercury poisoning, however, only a few were identified and investigated.

Case presentation

We would like to report a case of a 21-year-old lady who presented to us complaining of palpitations after consuming an unregistered slimming product containing sibutramine. During the physical examination, the clinician incidentally noted the exaggerated fairness of her face as compared to her neck skin tone. Further history taking it was discovered that the patient has been using a whitening cream with the brand labelled “Deluxe Beauty” as part of her facial care routine. She bought it online and has been using it twice daily for the past 3 months. Her vital signs were stable and clinical examinations were unremarkable. Her blood and urine were sent for analysis. Urine mercury was detected at 12.9mcg/L (Normal range is <10mcg/L), however full blood count, renal profile, liver function test and UFEME were normal with no evidence of target organ damage. As the patient remained well and asymptomatic, no chelation therapy was required and she was advised to stop using the whitening cream. She was discharged well with a 1-month follow-up in the outpatient clinic. Results of repeated urine mercury level during follow-up were negative and she remained well.

Discussion

In Malaysia, cosmetic products are regulated under the Control of Drugs and Cosmetics Regulations 1984 and cosmetic companies are required to register all their products with National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA). In this case, we reported to NPRA as well as sent the whitening cream sample for analysis. The cream was found to contain a significant mercury level of 5141.66mg/kg whereby standard products should not contain more than 1mg/kg unit of mercury. NPRA carried out necessary investigations and subsequently revoked the product’s registration. Retailers and consumers were also alerted through a press conference regarding this matter via public health authorities.

Conclusion

The use of mercury in cosmetic products should be strictly prohibited and monitored. A good collaboration between clinicians, NPRA and public health authorities is vital to raise awareness among consumers regarding the risk of inorganic mercury poisoning and to prevent any adverse health effects.