Severe burns from alkali drain cleaner

To the Editor: Alkali drain cleaner has previously been reported to cause oral, oesophageal and cutaneous burns.[1-4] The risk of these cleaners causing full thickness cutaneous burns in children needs to be emphasised.

Two toddlers recently presented to our hospital with severe burns after exposure to alkali drain cleaning products. An 18-month-old boy opened the box and bit open the silver foil packet of a foaming drain cleaner (Box 1). In addition to oral burns, he was found to have sustained full thickness burns down to subcutaneous fat in both groins and the left thigh (Box 2), with evidence of the cleaner found in his nappy. First aid had not been given. The second patient was a 3-year-old boy who had been playing with the drain cleaner with his siblings. Despite receiving immediate first aid of 30 minutes of cold running water, he sustained full thickness burns in the right groin down to deep fascia. Both patients required surgical debridement and split skin grafting.

These two cases highlight the severity of chemical burns that may be caused by a readily available household item. All corrosive chemical products should have clear warning labels with first aid recommendations, be sold exclusively in childproof containers and be stored out of reach at all times. In the event of an injury, clothing should be totally removed, including any nappy, to ensure that all remaining chemical has been removed, and the area irrigated with cold running water for at least 20 minutes.

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1 Al-Qattan MM, Pitkanen J. Delayed primary excision and grafting of full thickness alkali burns of the hand and forearm. *Burns* 2001; 27: 398-400.

1 Foaming drain cleaner container easily opened by toddler: note bite marks on silver foil container

2 Full thickness burns from alkali foaming drain cleaner involving both groins, extending onto left thigh and buttock

2 Janousek P, Jurovcík M, Grabec P, Kabelka Z. Corrosive oesophagitis in children following ingestion of sodium hydroxide granules — a case report. *Int J Pediatr Otorhinolaryngol* 2005; 69: 1257-1260.

3 Pitkanen J, Al-Qattan MM. Epidemiology of domestic chemical burns in Saudi Arabia. *Burns* 2001; 27: 376-378.

4 Yanturali S, Yaka E, Ersoy G. Chemical injury to the tongue following contact with sodium hydroxide drain cleaner. *Vet Hum Toxicol* 2004; 46: 319-321. ❑

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Legal clarification of "loss of chance of a better outcome" in Australia

To the Editor: In deference to Grattan-Smith,[1] defendant doctors are clearly advantaged and plaintiff patients disadvantaged by the High Court's decision in *Tabet v Gett*,[2] because a patient must now prove on the balance of probability (> 50%), not possibility (< 50%) as before, that negligence by the doctor caused harm.

Nonetheless, like us, Grattan-Smith empathises with the harmed plaintiff who receives no compensation and bears all litigation costs. In lieu of "loss of chance" as course of action, he suggests that Australia adopt "a universal disability insurance scheme". In such no-fault insurance systems in New Zealand, the United States and Scandinavia, an entitlement to compensation is not linked to proof that personal injury is the fault of another.[3]

A no-fault insurance scheme was proposed in the Australian Woodhouse Report under the Whitlam Government.[4] Although it was considered less costly than the present partial compensation scheme and would embody community responsibility for inevitable (medical) accidents of modern society, it was not adopted due to legal scare tactics.[5] Like Grattan-Smith, we support adoption of a similar scheme, as proposed by the Gillard Government.

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1 Grattan-Smith PJ. Legal clarification of "loss of chance of a better outcome" in Australia [letter]. *Med J Aust* 2012; 197: 273.

2 *Tabet v Gett* [2010] HCA 12.

3 Drabsch T. No fault compensation. Briefing paper no. 6/05. Sydney: NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, 2005. http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/key/NoFaultCompensation (accessed Sep 2012).

4 National Rehabilitation and Compensation Scheme Committee of Inquiry. Compensation and rehabilitation in Australia: report of the National Committee of Inquiry. Canberra: AGPS, 1974.

5 Luntz H. Reform of the law of negligence: wrong questions — wrong answers. *UNSW Law J* 2002; 25: 836. ❑