

An outbreak of contact dermatitis from Japanese lacquer tree

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As a child, Dylan Thomas played in the 'miniature woods and jungles' of Cwmdonkin Park, Swansea (1). During a severe storm in 1996, one of its exotic trees was blown over, later identified as *Rhus verniciflua* Stokes (Japanese lacquer tree) (2, 3).

The City Council instructed employees to log and dispose of the tree. A member of the public was also authorized to remove a large number of logs for burning. All those who came into contact with the tree were affected.

Case Reports

Patient no. 1, an arborist, sawed off its branches and disposed of the rest. After work, a dark patch of sap on his arm would not wash away, and smaller patches were scattered elsewhere. 4 days later, he developed a blistering rash on his arms, which spread to the thighs, chest, neck and face and took 4 weeks to go. 1 month later, he was asked to collect some wood from the house of the member of the public. Almost immediately he developed a blistering rash on his arms.

Patient no. 2 worked with patient no. 1 in sawing up the tree. He developed a rash 2 weeks later on the elbows and forearms spreading to the legs, chest and face and lasting for 4 weeks.

Patient no. 3 worked with patient no. 4. on sawing up the trunk of the tree. In spite of knowledge as to the tree's toxicity and protective clothing, he sustained black staining on his forearms and clothing and, the next day, had a sore throat and, within a few days, a rash on his forearms, thighs, groins, legs and feet, which took more than a month to go.

Patient no. 4 worked with patient no. 3 on the trunk. He also noticed black staining on his raincoat, gloves and trousers, and a black stain on his thigh would not wash off. Several days later, he developed a large weeping inflamed patch on his thigh at the same site as the sap stain, which cleared in a month.

Patient no. 5 was the member of the public who had acquired some logs, which his teenage son had helped him to transport. 3 weeks later, he and his son both developed widespread rashes on the abdomen, thighs and wrists, lasting 6 weeks. The family dog, a black retriever, developed blistering around the mouth with loss of hair around the muzzle, taking several weeks for full recovery.

Discussion

The history in all cases is in keeping with a severe allergic contact reaction to urushiol (pentadecylcatechols) in the tree. A previous European outbreak of *Rhus verniciflua* dermatitis was described in 1986 (4). An outbreak of poison ivy dermatitis from Holland has also been described (5).

Arborists and tree fellers should be aware of the severity of such reactions.

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