

Letter to the Editor

Platitudes in allergy – based on the example of the euro

Dear Sir

Allergies are “in”. Modern life-style is associated with allergy, and individuals who want to be considered modern should be able to flaunt an allergy. At the same time, one should only use *hypoallergenic*, fragrance- and biocide-free products, that are *all natural-bio* and *have not been tested on animals*, but are *approved by dermatologists* and have been *recommended by physicians and pharmacists*.

Consumers are not to know that these terms are usually just catchphrases, created by advertising executives and made liberal use of by marketing departments. A *hypoallergenic* cosmetic may be better than the “normal” counterpart (examples: polyester resin instead of tosylamide/formaldehyde resin in nail polish (1); biocidal aroma, instead of biocides in biocide-free products (2)), or worse. These terms may also represent wishful thinking regarding cosmetic testing in animals (3), throw dust in the shopper’s eye (*recommended by ...*) (3, 4), or just be plain misleading, as may be the case even with medical devices (5).

The majority of coins in circulation hitherto are known to be “dirty”, i.e., to contain and also to release nickel, but industry and even some allergists did not regard this as a major problem, at least not for the “normal” consumer (6, 7, reviewed in 8). However, there are about 10% nickel-allergic persons in the general population and many shop-assistants and cashiers in shops, banks and post offices handling coins during large parts of the working day, and thus heavily exposed to nickel and at increased risk of nickel-induced hand dermatitis. And they all, including the (yet) non-sensitized population, should be protected by the EU nickel directive (9).

From 1 January 2002 onwards, the euro will replace the local currency in several EU countries. After several years of discussion, engaging not only official scientific experts but also the nickel industry and European dermatologists (reviewed in (8)), it was decided to make the new product flawless in that the euro should neither contain nor release dangerous substances. This was achieved for the cent coins, but not for the 1- and 2-euro

coins. In all countries in which the conversion of currency is about to take place, there have been large-scale advertising and information campaigns stressing the positive aspects of the new currency. In Austria, e.g., the public has been told that “the minting material is safe for use in automatic machines, cannot perish nor be counterfeited, and is *allergy tested*”. The technical description of the coins assures the reader that the alloy “is free of nickel”. However, in small print, one is told that “the euro coins contain small quantities of nickel – for safety reasons”!

This is a surprising message, considering that in a study of pre-fabricated, unused 2-euro coins, performed on behalf of the European Commission DG XXIV (10), the amount of nickel released under standardized conditions was of the same magnitude as that from the currently most “dirty” coins: values ranged from 23.2 to 65.1 $\mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2/\text{week}$ and were thus higher by a factor of 40 to 100 than allowed in the EU nickel directive (0.5 $\mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2/\text{week}$ for objects intended to be used in direct and prolonged contact with the skin) (9, 11).

Coins are not specifically mentioned in the EU nickel directive as “products intended to come into direct and prolonged contact with the skin”; but they can do, and they may cause or aggravate hand eczema among cashiers with nickel allergy (7, 8), and thus represent a problem in clinical occupational dermatology. Furthermore, coins in the pocket may cause dermatitis on the thigh, especially in nickel-sensitive men. Therefore, a demand to apply the EU nickel directive to coins, in addition to other metal objects in close contact with the skin (7), seems justified.

If government institutions wish to gain acceptance for a product that may have a negative emotional charge to it anyway, they would be well advised not to copy salesmen, ape advertising executives, and propagate misleading information, but to provide accurate facts instead. Whether euro coins will be a potential problem for allergy patients is a determinable factor (6). One thing, however, is certain – contrary to official statements, they *will not* be free of nickel, and they *will* release nickel.

It may be a bad omen that certain countries with long experience in the study of nickel release from coins (Sweden and the UK) (6) have postponed the conversion of their currencies; and that the country with the best information to hand (Denmark) waives the euro (10)!

Yours sincerely
Werner Aberer
Department of Dermatology
University of Graz
Auenbruggerplatz 8
A-8036 Graz
Austria

References

1. Rietschel R L, Fowler J F. *Fisher's contact dermatitis*, 4th edition. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1995: 68.
2. Scheinman P L. Is it really fragrance-free? *Am J Cont Derm* 1997; 8: 239–242.
3. Barker M O. Caution: regulators at work. *Am J Cont Derm* 1996; 7: 185–187.
4. Barker M O. If the regulators don't get you, your competitors will. *Am J Cont Derm* 1997; 8: 49–51.
5. Taylor J S. Latex allergy update: 4 vignettes. *Am J Cont Derm* 1998; 9: 45–48.
6. Williams S P. Nickel dermatitis from coins. *Contact Dermatitis* 1999; 40: 60–61.
7. Kanerva L, Estlander T, Jolanki R. Bank clerk's occupational allergic nickel and cobalt contact dermatitis from coins. *Contact Dermatitis* 1998; 38: 217–218.
8. Lidén C, Carter S. Nickel release from coins. *Contact Dermatitis* 2001; 44: 160–165.
9. European Parliament and Council Directive 94/27/EEC. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, 22–07–1994. L 188/1–2 (nickel).
10. Risk Assessment Targeted report. *Nickel as used in euro coins*. Danish Environmental Protection Agency, Draft 2, June 1999.
11. Lidén C. Legislative and preventive measures related to contact dermatitis. *Contact Dermatitis* 2001; 44: 65–69.