

LETTERS

ALLERGY RISK FROM NEW COINS

Allergy risk from Royal Mint's new nickel plated steel coins should be publicly assessed

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The Treasury is introducing Royal Mint nickel plated (aRMour) coins to cut costs. However, consideration must be given to the potential costs to health from skin disease related to nickel exposure (allergic contact dermatitis and hand dermatitis); financial implications to the NHS for clinical management of affected people; and other taxpayer costs (inability to work because of hand dermatitis related to nickel allergy). Considerable evidence supports these concerns,¹⁻⁵ which have not been assessed by the Treasury or the Royal Mint.

In the absence of responses through usual channels, we posed three questions to the Royal Mint under the Freedom of Information Act (box).

The Royal Mint confirmed that it had no information to address these specific questions. However, the Swedish Riksbank recently reviewed its coinage and concluded that nickel plated coins pose unacceptable risks to health. Indeed, it will not include nickel containing alloys in its coinage.⁶ The prevalence and implications of contact allergy to nickel in Sweden are no different from those in the UK.

On 21 February 2012 one of us (IRW), with colleagues, met Sarah Gannaway of the Treasury and three Royal Mint coworkers. Although the Treasury might not be expected to have the expertise to undertake a risk assessment of the potential impacts to health of the nickel plated coins, discussions showed

that the Royal Mint seems to be poorly informed. It has proved impossible to obtain reassurance that the nickel plated coins will not cause adverse effects in people with hand eczema (dermatitis) who have nickel contact allergy.

This is primarily a public health issue, so might Sir John Beddington, chief scientific adviser to the government, be asked for a view? It should be for the public record that a competent risk assessment has formally considered the concerns.

Competing interests: None declared.

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Questions to the Royal Mint

What is the release of nickel from the surface of the nickel plated (aRMour) coins ($\mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2/\text{week}$)?

Have coin handling studies (using Royal Mint nickel plated coins (aRMour)) with measurements of nickel on the hands been undertaken?

Has a risk assessment been undertaken to determine the effect of exposure to nickel plated coins (aRMour) on those members of the UK population who have nickel contact allergy?