



Hazards of Hair Styles

Some members may have seen stories in *The Times Educational Supplement* and other newspapers about the fire hazards of hair sprays. These are based on reports of a symposium on safety which was a part of ASE Annual Meeting in Nottingham in January. Unfortunately, the reports were not very accurate, and the real situation is substantially that which we reported in this journal in September 1986.

In the last 5 or 6 years there have been perhaps 4 or 5 incidents in which a pupil's hair has caught fire, although to the best of our knowledge nobody has been seriously injured as a result, and the fire has extinguished itself. One of these incidents occurred in a home economics room, but the others happened in science lessons. It appears that most, and possibly all, of the pupils concerned were of Afro-Caribbean origin, and probably applied a preparation to their hair (a gel, not a spray) to give it a "wet look". The chemical composition of these preparations is not such as to make them particularly flammable, the main component being propane-1, 2, 3-triol (glycerol). If present on the hair they may cause it to burn rather than just singe, but the main problem would appear to be the hair style itself. Hair which is brushed out in such a way as to expose a large surface area to the atmosphere is inherently more flammable than that which is combed down flat. If it is sticking out some distance, it is more likely to come into contact with a naked flame - and similar problems can be experienced with ties or scarves.

Teachers should be vigilant, and should warn pupils about the problem - not just as far as school is concerned, but as it might affect them at home. It would be sensible to forbid pupils from spraying their hair shortly before entering a laboratory, in case some flammable solvent did linger for few minutes. However, we do not at present think the evidence justifies a blanket ban on hair preparations, since they may not be central to the problem.