

A Lousy Start to the Day

One morning, one of my children (who shall remain nameless, but knows his name perfectly well) hit the jackpot. He managed to break all the records for creating mayhem during the daily wrangle to get everyone into the car in time for work, school, kindy and day care.

At the critical moment, as we lobbed everything into the car boot just minutes before we would have turned into pumpkins at the striking of the hour, he announced that he had an itchy head.

Moreover, that he had had an itchy head for absolutely ages and why had not I, as a supposedly caring mother, who should know by instinct that his head was itchy, done something about it?

He loudly and with righteous indignation proclaimed this minor discomfort to his small person. Yes, indeed I was responsible for all his bodily functions and, by projection, for whatever was happening on his head.

It was the first I had heard about it.

My gingerly inspection of the offending noggin uncovered teams of dreaded vermin doing gymnastics along strands of his unruly mop, their white athletic features offering an embarrassingly stark contrast on his dark brown hair. They were screaming to be noticed at school: “HEY EVERYBODY! YEAH, YOU OVER THERE, AND YOU, AND YOU—LOOK HERE, SEE THESE WHITE THINGS STUCK TO HIS HAIR? WE ARE NITS, YEAH NITS, THIS KID’S GOT NITS!”

His sister had briefly hosted nits during the previous holidays, but in far more discreet circumstances. Because we were away from home, we were able to keep this ignominious source of shame out of the local rag in our own district.

This time, however, discretion was going to be harder.

Slinging the baby into his car seat, I grabbed the child and hastily doused his head with foul-smelling stuff of great but dubious promise that was waiting fortuitously on the laundry shelf for just such a horrible emergency. Remarkably, I still managed to deliver him, hair suspiciously wringing wet, to school before bell time. For good measure, after school he was carted off to the barber and ruthlessly shorn.

At this point, it may be appropriate to confide in you, without expanding too much on personal detail but speaking from experience nonetheless, that head lice do not necessarily confine their perambulations to the heads of small children. Therefore, parents, be ever vigilant. This small disaster has the potential to get out of hand very quickly. Whoever you are, wherever you live, it periodically visits the eager

schoolchild, thereafter viciously undermining the dignity and social standing of the entire household.

And if you are a new parent of a gorgeous infant smelling of Johnson's Baby Soap and sporting only a few darling wisps of hair, it is as well to be aware of the many and various delights that await you in the not-too-distant future; head lice are just one. In five short years, your baby will be mingling joyfully with the great unwashed masses, of which, naturally, *your* child is not one. The purpose in *your* life of the great unwashed masses is to have scorn heaped upon them when your perfect child returns to your immaculate home with something as unbelievably commonplace and disgraceful as head lice.

There is never a nice time to welcome head lice into your family. Our only other, to date, nit episode evidenced itself when we were in the plane on the way to Canberra to stay with my hyperhygienic sister, Tina. It was too late to request the pilot to return immediately to Brisbane, there to douse our shame in copious quantities of repugnant chemical shampoo which guarantees but does not necessarily come up with a once-only solution to your problem. We had no choice but to admit to our awful manifestation of gauche Queensland-style social delinquency in Canberra's airport arrival lounge.

Needless to say, we were adequately and severally medicated forthwith.

Don't be ashamed if you don't know whether your child is happily spreading head lice around the community. For a long time I didn't know either. Mind you, I would have been perfectly happy never to find out, but I am able

to philosophise now, from the perspective of one who has survived thus far, that motherhood should be experienced fully if it is to be experienced at all. And while nits are one of the more bothersome manifestations, at least they are one of the less painful.

An itchy head is a dead give-away. If you genuinely feel you are socially above having head lice, then ignore this symptom, although this advice comes with the caveat, *at your peril*. You simply must not ignore, however, the eggs attached to the hair stems in the region behind the ears. They are horribly distinctive, only one possible thing, and clearly visible to anyone who has anything to do with your child at relatively close range.

Your chemist will have a good medicated shampoo and much attendant advice and sympathy. Follow all the instructions carefully, and lap up the sympathy. This may not be forthcoming from every quarter.

