

“NITS” ARE an occupational hazard for primary school staff, and they’ve never been harder to shift.

Working in a class room can be a lousy life. Or, more accurately, if you have regular contact with 30 primary school children, sooner or later you will find yourself scratching your head.

At least one in ten primary school children will have “nits” in the course of a school year and, if not rapidly treated the lice may spread from child to child and eventually to the classroom staff, often re-infesting hair which has already been deloused. What’s more, for the past 40 years the injudicious use of expensive insecticide medication (which ought to be treated with the same caution as agricultural pesticide) means that we now have highly resistant Robocop lice, unwilling to give up their tenancy without a fight. So what’s to be done?

The female louse – *Pediculus capitis* or *P. capitis* – mates then lays dull grey eggs close to the scalp where it is warm. Within seven or eight days, the eggs hatch leaving behind a white blob. Within a fortnight, the baby lice, having fattened themselves on the blood of the host then lay yet more eggs.

Lice can’t fly or jump. They are not conveyed from one head to another via pillows or hats. They move from scalp to scalp by one head contacting another – an occupational hazard for all support staff. The result is itchininess and, often, a rash at the back of the neck as well.

Community Hygiene Concern is a not-for-profit organisation which advocates a “whole school approach” to tackling lice, following the government’s National Healthy School Standards. It suggests holding at least three Bugbusting Days, one per term, to raise awareness and pre-



*Head louse magnified 32 times with an electron microscope*

# Head hunters

## Yvonne Roberts on a problem for the whole school

empt a widespread outbreak of lice.

Bugbusting involves using shampoo and conditioner and then, before rinsing away the conditioner, dividing and combing through the hair section by section, using a special nit comb, removing any eggs or lice found, each time. This is a process which ought to be carried out every three days for a fortnight.

The aim of this collective approach is to improve understanding and reduce the stigma (as the chemist

keeps telling me cheerfully, “Nits like clean hair too” ... as if we don’t have more than enough evidence in our family to prove it). A communal approach might also help to contain a potential outbreak and offer a better chance of protection for staff while reducing embarrassment for individual parents reared in a time when a letter from the school nurse was carried home like a passport of shame.

What’s more, getting a classroom of heads together to think about bugs and how they can be busted almost sounds like fun – unless you’re too busy scratching.

■ Alternative organic products to deal with lice at [www.greenpeople.com](http://www.greenpeople.com).