

Beyond reasonable drought

The MAP (many Australian photographers) group, which consists of about 80 photographers with a passion for high quality documentary image making, have recently completed a project recording the impact on Australia of the ten year drought.

Called *Beyond Reasonable Drought* the exhibition is currently on view at Old Parliament House in Canberra; and from October will tour around Australia.

The problems of climate change and water resource issues in our “sunburnt country” are now well known. Not of the same magnitude, but nevertheless discomfoting are personal problems caused by the dry weather, especially during winter.

The cold weather encourages us to spend too much time in a hot bath or shower, and the harsh soaps we use further strip away the natural layer of protective oils. The result is skin which much more easily becomes itchy, red and inflamed.

Sometimes a skin problem is the first sign of a more serious condition that needs proper and thorough investigation. Childhood infections like measles and chickenpox may only come to notice by way of the rash that accompanies the other more obscure symptoms; and those supersensitive people amongst us may find that contact with various substances will cause irritating skin allergies. However, skin problems often result from, or are made worse by, lack of care and attention.

Eczema and dermatitis are two general terms which mean very much the same thing – inflammation of the skin. Medically speaking there are two major forms of eczema: contact eczema and atopic eczema.

As the name suggests contact eczema results from direct contact with an irritant substance, often a chemical substance such as detergent, shampoo, cosmetics or the metal in jewellery. Redness, minor swelling, oozing and itching might all be features of contact eczema.

The cause of atopic eczema is not so easy to define. It tends to occur in families and is more likely to affect people who also have asthma or hay fever. Atopic eczema may be made worse by stress. Sometimes, it may be itchy, red and inflamed with small weeping blisters; sometimes it may be dry and scaly, usually in the creases of the elbows, knees and wrists.

If you have a chronic skin condition such as eczema or dermatitis avoid the use of soaps altogether. Instead use substitutes – creams such as aqueous or sorbolene cream or the specially formulated *Cetaphil* range of products.

The addition of tar products (like *Pinetarsol*) to the bath will help relieve the itch and irritation; and hydrocortisone creams (such as *Dermaid*) which are now available without prescription are also very effective to reduce the swelling and redness as well as the itch. A prescription product containing the new steroid ingredient pimacrolimus may be helpful for atopic dermatitis, particularly for children.

For skin which is extra sensitive to chemicals, cotton gloves should be used next to the skin, and then rubber or vinyl gloves over the top, when washing or doing work around the house. Once the rash is under control, the application of a barrier cream will help prevent its recurrence.

Of course skin rashes can occur as a result of any number of different causes. The rash needs to be correctly diagnosed so that the cause is identified and if possible removed, and the right treatment used.

The new fact card titled *Eczema and Dermatitis* will help you differentiate between one skin problem and another and help you choose the best possible treatment.

This card along with around 80 others in the Self Care series is available from pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society’s health information. Phone 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.